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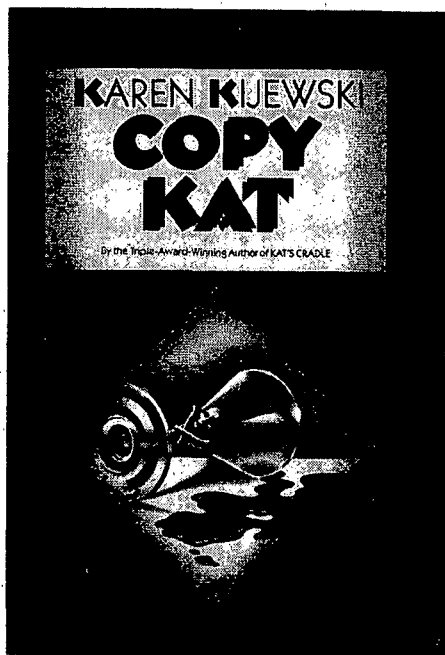
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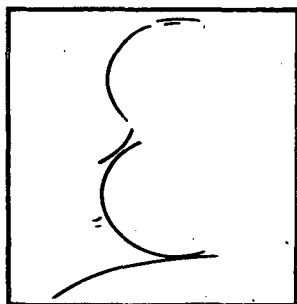
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*Cover by Jud Guitteau*

*Interior illustrations by Laurie Davis*

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**R**eaders who have been with us for a while will know that Double Issues are usually an occasion for some stories from AHMM's archives, stories we think warrant a new readership. This time, however, we are departing from that tradition. All the stories in this Mid-December issue are new ones, with the exception of Josephine Bell's "The Silver Snuffbox"—which will, however, be new to readers in this country.

For those who like seasonal stories to add an extra fillip to, say, Halloween, we have not been neglectful. "Many Are the Traps of the Crafty" by Robert Wm. Klein directly involves itself with this ominous time of year. Dan Crawford's "The Thousand Toes of Bliss" gives a new tweak to the tale of the

Ruler of the Underworld (hmm). Don Marshall's "As Ye Sow So Shall Ye ..." is appropriately horrific.

Nor have we forgotten Thanksgiving: our "Unsolved" is about bringing home a turkey.

And those are just a few of the puzzles that await you.

So as not to puzzle our faithful readers unduly, however, in future issues anyway, we wish to announce that this is the last of Carol Harper's "Booked & Printed" columns for AHMM. Ms. Harper, who has been keeping us so well informed about the latest in mystery novels for almost four years, has moved to London and so can no longer continue. Starting in the January issue, her place will be taken (retaken,

*(continued on page 39)*

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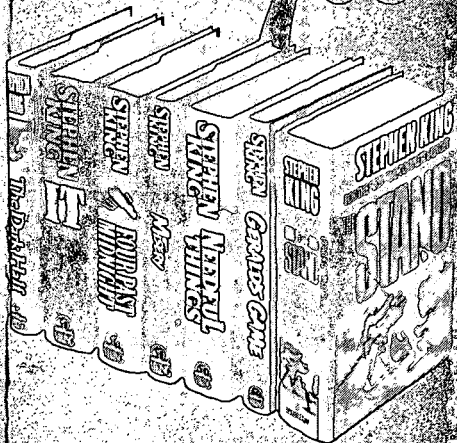
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# The Supermarket Bandit

by Stephen Wasylyk

**A** lone with the soft humming of the freezer cases at the rear of the supermarket, Klauder lifted his head at what sounded like a small scream filtering from the front. Nothing followed but silence. Probably another shopper stung by a sharp price increase.

He tumbled a few more frozen dinners into his cart atop the half dozen already there and continued his meandering along the deserted aisles, roaming alone and free among the boxes, cans, and jars, which was why he always shopped on Wednesday night in the last hour before the store closed.

Fifteen minutes later he emerged at the checkout to see the lone, white-faced checker, both her mouth and her cash drawer wide open and her trembling hands pressed to her cheeks, leaning back in her little stall. Behind her, the young, sandy-haired, mustachioed manager and a teenaged boy seemed to offer support as they all faced Meg Boniface, the county sheriff.

Solid, erect, shoulders back,

graying brown hair cut short, heavy winter jacket open, Meg held a notebook in one hand and a pen in the other; a stalwart and reassuring presence patiently waiting for the younger checker, a frizzy-haired blonde with a prominent nose in a narrow face, to calm down.

The familiar tableau gave Klauder the reason for the scream.

As his clattering cart drew her attention, Meg's eyebrows lifted hopefully when she saw him behind it.

"Holdup," she explained unnecessarily. "Like the others. See anything?"

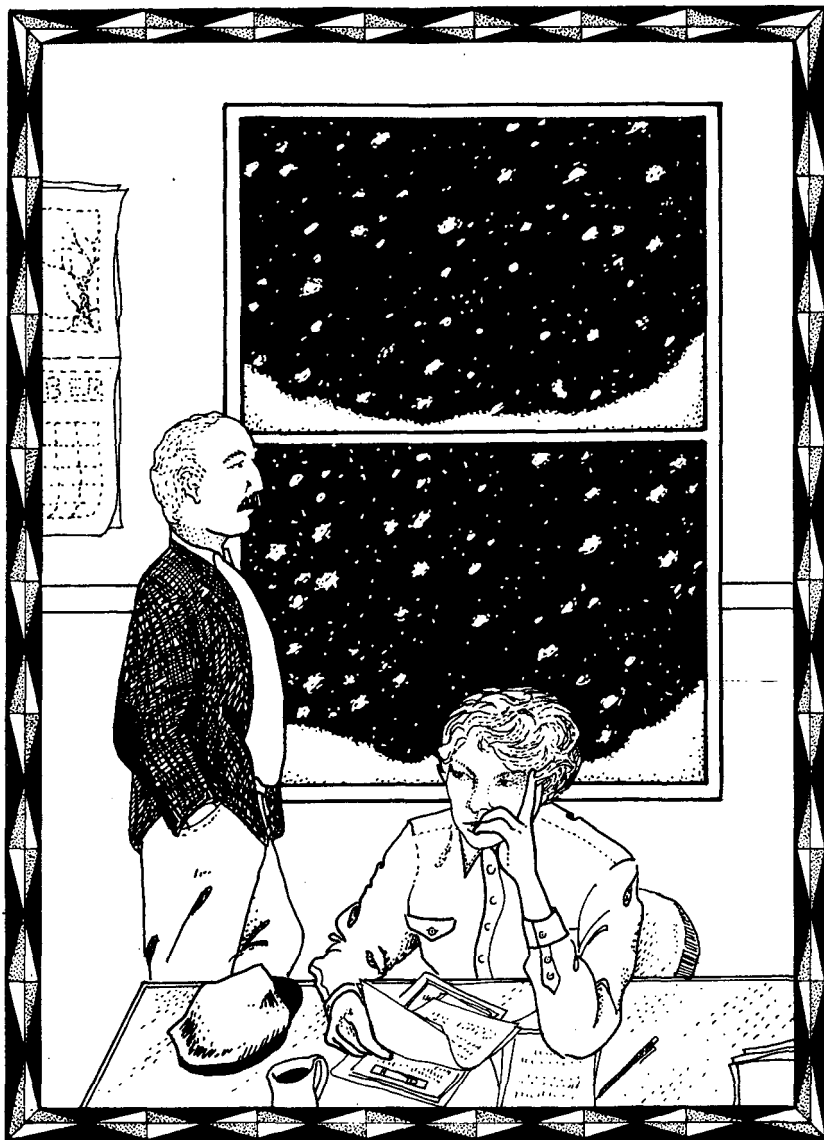
"Nothing."

"Damn. You might have helped if you had."

"If he had the usual gun, I'd have done nothing."

She flicked the notebook impatiently. "Wouldn't expect you to play hero, but you'd have made a good witness—"

"He was *short*. *Small*. The gun was *big*," said the checker loudly, her moment in the sun threatened. After all, *she* was the one who'd been held up.



"IT'S SO SIMPLE WE OUGHT TO GIVE HIM THE THIEF OF THE YEAR AWARD."



There are no small guns when you're looking down the muzzle, thought Klauder.

"Clothes?" asked Meg.

"Tan parka. Hood up and something across his face. Didn't say anything. Just pointed the gun at the register. I knew what he wanted. I gave him the cash. He waved for me to get down on the floor and ran out."

Klauder began unloading his cart.

"Hey," said the manager, anger fluttering his droopy blond mustache, "we've just been held up. We can't handle that now."

Klauder stacked his frozen dinners alongside a half-dozen cans of heat-and-serve equivalents, an array that stamped him as a man living alone who hated to cook for himself. "Life must go on."

"There's no cash in the register."

"I'll give you a check for the exact amount."

"Our policy on checks is—"

"The sheriff will vouch for me."

"Like hell I will." Meg turned to the manager. "His checks bounce higher than golf balls on concrete."

The manager blinked, swallowed, saw the grin, and disgustedly said, "Jeez," in a low voice, obviously disapproving

of a law officer who could joke at a time like this, not realizing that her good humor expressed relief at not finding bleeding people sprawled on the floor and that only money was lost.

"Okay," said Klauder. "But you'll have to take the frozen food back before it thaws because I'm not doing it."

The manager looked at the stacked pile, rolled his eyes to indicate that the retail business was surely the first step toward martyrdom, and motioned the checker out of the stall.

Meg took the girl aside as he noisily totaled Klauder's week's supply of food while the teenager dropped it haphazardly into two paper sacks.

Klauder gave him the check. "Look at it as a new start. Just be thankful no one was hurt."

Meg fell into step as he headed for the door, a large and formidable bastion of law and order, but an attractive woman none the less.

"Same as the other three," she said. "Like someone is running a computer program. Maybe someone saw him this time."

Klauder glanced down the line of stores in the small shopping plaza. All were dark except one fifty yards away.

"Laundromat," she explained. "Novachek's down

there. Either he found someone to talk to or he's washing his socks." She marched along as he headed for his Blazer, her voice now carrying a trace of concern. "We have to stop these holdups, Klauder. We're approaching critical mass."

He agreed. It was only a matter of time until someone became foolish, that gun went off, and more than cash was lost.

"How about putting aside getting rich from carving those ducks and giving us a hand?"

He set the bags down on the passenger side floor.

"Be happy to, but I'm driving to Baltimore tomorrow for a meeting with Halley and to pick up a check. I'll be back Friday afternoon."

"One of the boys saw Natalie Something heading west well over the speed limit this afternoon, and I see you're back to frozen dinners for the microwave. Sounds like a permanent departure. Hurt her feelings?"

She did have a way of putting two and two together. Natalie Thurman, the tall blonde who had rented the cabin next to his, wouldn't be back.

"I have an open invitation to visit her in Pittsburgh any time. Since you won't be happy until you know why, she left because she saw herself in a mirror once too often with her hair in a ponytail, a sweatshirt,

jeans and boots. That wasn't her, she said. She's the beauty salon every week, silk blouse, tailored suit with short skirt, pantyhose and spiked heels type. She called her former law firm and got her job back."

"Too bad, but both of you can now look forward to becoming rich. And speaking of money, I hear you're doing so well you can afford a housekeeper."

He grinned. Since his ad in the weekly last Friday had carried a box number, the only way she could have known was because Harry and Jane, the couple who publish the paper, had told her.

He slid behind the wheel. "Only for three days a week."

She closed the door. "Have a good trip and hold the speed down. Staties give you a ticket, there's nothing I can do for you."

She was, he thought as he drove home on the dark, deserted roads, a perfect example of how the people who wear badges can't do it all alone. Very little went on in the county, good or bad, without someone's saying, better tell Meg. It was remarkable how people did things for her. Himself included. She'd always had to call in the state police for investigations, but when she'd found he was a Philadelphia homicide detective on early re-

tirement, she'd enlisted his experience, eventually talking the County Board of Supervisors into taking him on as a detective-consultant so that when she used him he'd be paid for what he was willing to do for nothing. Perhaps that was her secret. She played fair with everyone.

He pulled into his carport, extracted his bags, and stood for a moment in the cold, still night. To his left, the blackness of the water was discernible only because of the lighter value of the lakeshore snow. Some hundred yards up the road, the darkened cabin owned by Charlie and Grace Boynton couldn't be seen at all. They wouldn't return from Florida for another two months.

Natalie, who had rented it for the winter, wouldn't return at all. The cold nipped at his face, the night feeling harsh and empty. That he'd miss her was putting it mildly. She'd been responsible for the thawing of the emotions that had been in a deep freeze since his wife had died, and he was grateful.

They both handled her departure very lightly. Very adult approach. But both knew that trading casual clothes for designer fashions hadn't been why she'd left. A relationship

needed a more solid base than gratitude.

Friday afternoon he returned early enough to deposit a fat check into his account before the bank closed. The talent for carving wild ducks in flight had emerged from nowhere and the price had skyrocketed since Halley had begun featuring them in his outdoorsmen's catalogues, some of the earlier ones already collector's items.

He picked up his mail at the post office and walked over to the newspaper to find two replies to his ad.

One demanded transportation, twenty dollars an hour, lunch, and no chore that would require the woman to get her hands wet. The other, shakily penned, he handed to Harry Persky, the owner, editor, and publisher.

Harry grinned. "Mabel. She answers almost every ad we run. Either it's her way of denying she's eighty-nine years old, or she's hoping for the basis of an age discrimination lawsuit. Very feisty lady, Mabel. Want to run the ad again?"

He waved him off. "Wouldn't do any better, would we?"

Meg was behind her desk, eyes closed, chin propped up in her left hand, an inactive ballpoint in the right. He cleared his throat.

"Supermarket Bandit still running loose?"

She opened her eyes, stretched, yawned, and shook her head. "A wisp of smoke, Klauder. Just wondering why he's never said a word. Easy enough to disguise a voice, if that's what he's afraid of."

"All stores get hit on an off night just before closing, like the other night?"

She nodded. "Tuesday or Wednesday. Even though he gets a lot less that way. The managers aren't stupid. They run only one register with just enough cash to make change. The night you were there, he got three hundred or so. The others were around that figure. One armed robbery a month with that kind of return is hardly worth the risk."

"Not exactly an overwhelming crime wave. A schedule like that gives you plenty of time to set up stakeouts."

"Sure, but you tell me where because I don't have enough men to cover all the markets."

"Make any traffic stops on suspicion after the reports came in?"

She sighed. "No vehicle description, Klauder, and the judges don't consider roadblocks playing fair."

"What did Novachek end up with? A witness or clean socks?"

"Young woman with a baby. She didn't see or hear anything."

"Anyone else in the laundromat?"

"Only the kid who makes change and sympathizes when a washer or dryer swallows your quarters without operating. He was raising his cultural values by drooling through *Penthouse* with his Walkman plugged into his empty head. Wouldn't have seen or heard a massacre in the parking lot."

He rose. "I'll come back Wednesday evening, go over the file, and take a look at the four markets that were hit. Might stumble across something that will tell us which one may be next."

He was halfway out the door when she said, "I'm sorry about Natalie."

He paused. "I'll survive."

"On frozen dinners," she said dryly. "But have faith, Klauder. There's always another good cook around the corner."

He should never have mentioned Natalie's culinary skills.

On Wednesday, he looked at the dinners in the freezer, glanced at the microwave, said to hell with it, slammed the freezer door, and drove into town to Trevane's bar and grill.

When he'd first moved here, getting a table on an off night had been no trouble, but since the opening of the ski resort, Trevane's was always jammed with lean, healthy, bright looking, trendy young couples wearing turtlenecks, sweaters with flowers, and pants tucked into boots, to whom being caught on one of the more publicized ski slopes elsewhere was a social disaster from which they'd never recover. The rest of the year, it was filled out by their clones, who had bought the undistinguished but expensive conglomeration of angles, skylights, patios, balconies, brick and wood condos at the far end of the lake.

Nursing a beer at the bar, Klauder thought they all looked as though they'd come off a production line in a secret factory tucked away in the mountains, run by elves with a sense of humor, which had spewed them forth complete with gold cards.

Trevane himself rescued him, leading him to a table in the corner.

"Sorry, Klauder. I hate having old customers wait, but—"

"No apology necessary," said Klauder. "Just take the money and run. They'll be gone as soon as they discover somewhere else."

The influx had brought more

than money. They'd forced Meg to expand her small force, increased her controlled substance problem exponentially, and forced her to spend more time behind her desk administering.

"Those people are like dandelion seeds," she said. "Look pretty drifting in the wind, but when they land and take root you get ugly weeds."

She wasn't there when he walked into the office, but she'd left the file for him. As she said, the holdups could have come off a computer program. He made a note of the dates. The first had been at the end of October, the others following at four and five week intervals. All had taken place between eight and nine. He noted the locations and found them on the map. No discernible pattern there.

Wanting to arrive at the sites at the time the holdups took place, he spent an hour commiserating with a morose Novachek, the two-month rookie on inside duty for neglecting to get the name of the woman he'd interviewed in the laundromat. "Teach you to keep your hormones in your hip pocket when on duty," Meg had told him.

**T**he sign loomed suddenly out of the darkness and the uncertain flakes of an ap-



proaching storm. Village of Andorra. He wondered how a group of homes went about qualifying as a village. Just beyond them was a stop-signed intersection, a self-service gas station on one corner, evidently the magnet for a small row of stores fronted by asphalt paving that ran up to the concrete of the station itself. Hardly a supermarket, the one at the end—yet too big for a mini-market or a convenience store. The others ranged from a dry cleaners to a real estate office. All dark, except for the market. He parked and mentally reviewed the report in the file. There had been only two people in the store. A wave of the gun had sent them to the floor before the man left, and neither had been foolhardy or brave enough to get up until several minutes had passed. The only other possible witness had been the man in the booth at the service station, who had seen nothing. Walled in, thick bulletproof glass in front of him, his view was confined to the pumps. He might have had a customer about the time of the holdup—a young woman driving an old car. A cash customer. Locating her for questioning fitted into the category of miracle.

The storm was getting down to serious business by the time

he reached the second. Slightly larger shopping plaza and store, as though the man was working his way up in the world. Again, only one check-out person who had been waved to the floor before the man left. Three other shops had been open, but two were at the far end and the third in the center. Even if those in the two at the end had a reason to look out, they were too far from the market to see much of anything except a moving figure. In the card and gift shop in the center, the woman had been talking to a young mother who had her baby with her. Like most women, she'd been more interested in the baby than anything else.

Beautiful, thought Klauder. If this guy decides to go big-time, Meg is in real trouble.

By the time he reached the third market, he was cruising through three inches of snow. He didn't stop. The pattern of two still-open shops and the market jigsawed neatly with that of the other three shopping plazas. Meg would find it easy to fill in the missing pieces with similar ones to complete the picture.

And as she did, the M.O. could have come off a computer. Tan parka—every second person in the county wore one, including him—face concealed,

man silent, gun, people waved to the floor, the usual special sale banners and stacked impulse merchandise blocking their view through the plate glass windows even if they'd had enough nerve to stand up to see him take off, only a couple of other stores open, the man disappearing as fast as a politician queried about voting himself a pay raise at midnight.

That vanishing act was the real puzzle. If nothing else, the laws of chance said someone would have noticed something, seen someone, noted a car leaving fast. Surely, the man didn't hang around—

Uh-huh. Klauder grinned. He couldn't remember seeing it in the interviews in the third investigation, but if it weren't there, he'd bet he could come back tomorrow and confirm it.

**I**t was in the file. He looked out the window at the snow deepening the six inches already on the Blazer. If he didn't leave soon, he'd be here all night with Meg, Novachek, and a pot of coffee for company. He turned to Meg.

"That's it," he said. "A young woman in the gas station, a young mother in the card shop, a young woman in the hardware store, a young woman with a baby in the laundromat.

No one knew her and she wasn't important enough to rate a detailed description. In fact, Novachek didn't even bother to get her name—"

"Dummy," she said. "By the time I realized—hell, she was gone."

"—but the gas station attendant seemed to think the one he saw was driving an old car, and there was a beatup one in front of the laundromat. Send Novachek to the state police artist, have a sketch made of the woman he saw, and show it to the other three. If I'm right, they'll say it's the same woman. She drives the holdup man there. If it looks clear, she diverts the attention of anyone in the only open shop close enough to matter, while he holds up the market. By the time the people there work up enough nerve to get off the floor, he's hidden in the back seat—"

"Dammit," she said softly, "you mean he could have been fifty yards from us that night?"

"You were there before she had time to pull out, so she was interviewed as a possible witness. You were looking for a man, not a woman. When she drove away, she took him with her. That's how he disappears so fast. It's so simple we ought to give him the Thief of the Year award."

Eyes closed, she sat as if picturing it in her mind. "There's an inconsistency in your theory, Klauder. If it's the same woman, why did she have a baby with her twice?"

"Assuming that no mother deliberately takes a baby along on a holdup, especially on a cold winter's night, maybe she had to."

"Had to?"

"No babysitter available. The first step is to have the sketch made. If the people identify her as the woman, all you have to do is stake out any shopping plaza that fits the configuration of the first four—only the market and a few other stores open—and wait for a young woman in an old car to show up, with or without baby. How many come to mind?"

"Only two. Unless he goes back to one of the first four."

"Too smart to risk that." He glanced out the window. "What's with this storm?"

"Twelve inches by morning. The county's on emergency status."

He reached for his parka. "I'm gone. The drifts along the lake road are probably that high already."

She walked with him to the door.

"Let's hope you got it right, Klauder. Didn't come up with

why they pull only one a month, did you?"

Klauder shrugged. "Maybe they need rent money."

**H**e stood at the window with his morning coffee, looking out at at least twelve inches in the flat areas and drifts double that. At the ski resort, the manager would be ecstatic.

The state would plow the main roads while the county would open up the secondaries, particularly those where the school buses ran. The sheriff's department would have its hands full until things settled down. "It's a natural law, Klauder," Meg had said. "When it snows, the crime rate goes down but the aggravation rate goes up." Some of the aggravation in this case being Novachek delayed in getting to the state police artist and showing copies of his sketch to the three people who had seen the young woman. Annoying, but not vital. Even though this was a short month, the next holdup had to be at least two weeks away.

He worked all day wondering if he was becoming money-hungry in the number of carvings he'd committed himself to do for Halley, breaking for lunch and several sessions of wrestling with the heavy snow

blower George Boynton had insisted on giving him. "Hell, I'm too old to use it any more, Klauder. You might as well have it." By the time he'd cleared his way to the road, he had a good idea of how George had developed his bad heart.

The roar of the plow coming through that night brought on a few mental calculations. With all the roads now open, Novachek was free to see the artist in the morning. He'd be back in time to show copies of the sketch to the three people who had seen the young woman, giving Klauder two good excuses to go to town on Saturday morning. One, for a good breakfast that required no dishwashing on his part, and two, for a visit to Meg's office to see what the young woman looked like.

The soft lines of the sketch gave more of an impression than detail. She appeared somewhat older than he'd imagined, with a great deal of character in the square-jawed, pretty face. Generous mouth, long hair falling to her shoulders from beneath the wool cap. Looking at the line of the jaw, he thought that the no-babysitter guess was probably right. She'd brought the baby along because she'd had no choice.

"Yeah, they all agree it could

be the same woman," said Meg, "but wipe that smug look off your face. None knows her, and neither does anyone else in those four shopping plazas."

"How tall?"

"Five two or three, hair dark, eyes blue, according to Novachek. I'm showing the sketch around in the two plazas I think might be next, to see if anyone there knows her. If not, I'll leave a copy so they can give us a call if they see her. I figure she has to be along when he closes the store he's going to hit next. What do you think?"

Outside her window, clanking front-end loaders filled trucks with snow to be dumped into the lake. Before the condos and the ski resort, solar power had removed the snow. At no cost, a few irate taxpayers had bitterly pointed out. The environmental benefit had been cast aside when civic and business groups had insisted that you had to spend money to make money, tactfully not mentioning that those who did the spending and those who did the making weren't necessarily the same.

He handed her the sketch. "It's all a guessing game. Can't hurt to canvass those plazas once. You might luck out, but I wouldn't leave sketches. Most people are lousy actors. Someone who sees her walk in might

get nervous. If either of them is sensitive enough to pick it up, they'll not only call off the holdup, but probably take off. Which leaves you nowhere. You can't prove a thing on the other holdups, so you have to collar these two while this one is going down. I'd rather canvass once. No results, I'd gamble on the pattern and stake out the markets on the two slowest nights, Tuesday and Wednesday, during the last week of this month and the first of the next. I can't see them changing a successful M.O."

"Sounds good, but with this snow, we'll have schussing yuppies coming out of our ears every weekend, which means extra duty for everyone. That leaves me a little thin during the week. I may not be able to tie up two men just sitting around for hours."

He grinned.

"What men?" he said. "We'll do it. Since all you've been doing lately is sitting around doing nothing, it'll do you good to get out."

She leaned back, folded her arms, and regarded him balefully. "Sitting around? Doing nothing? Very diplomatic way to present the suggestion, Klauder."

"Don't be so damned sensitive. Do we do it or not?"

"Oh, we do it, Klauder." She

smiled at him. "As you say, it'll do me good to get out."

When it came to smiling false smiles, she could win an Academy Award. He'd touched a nerve, and it was going to cost him.

He wondered when and how much.

Ten nights later he was parked in the smaller of the two plazas, a row of twelve shops anchored at one end by a branch bank and at the other by the market. All the shops were closed except for the video rental near the darkened back, a beer-selling deli two doors from that, and a pizza place in the middle. A temperature of eight had kept everyone but the brave or insane at home. The video rental hadn't done enough business to pay for the electricity, the pizza place not far behind, but the sixpacks had been flowing out of the deli all evening. Beer must be warming. The deli was doing better than the supermarket. If the holdup man had any brains, he'd zero in on that.

This was the second night of the stakeout. The first had yielded nothing but derogatory remarks about his intelligence from Meg while she massaged what she claimed were frostbitten toes in thermal socked feet



propped on an open drawer. If nothing turned up tonight, they'd have to try again next week. And hope it was warmer.

He stamped his feet and clapped his hands, insulated boots and gloves notwithstanding. Without the heater going, the interior of the Blazer was the approximate temperature of his freezer at home, but exhaust curling from a parked vehicle would alert any sensible holdup man.

Even the thermos of coffee he'd brought along hadn't helped. If he had to give chase, he'd be too stiff to move fast.

Since the night before, he'd had the feeling he was wasting his time. It took a car parked an inordinately long time in front of the pizza place to tell him that distracting the attention of anyone inside wasn't the only reason the woman selected the shop closest to the market. Her car had to be convenient to it so that a running man was exposed for as short a time as possible. Each had been the type of place she could leave when she pleased. Even the laundromat. She'd been delayed there only because Novacheck and Meg had appeared too quickly.

But like the unknown parker, at the pizza place she'd have to wait until her order was ready. Leave without it and several

very angry pizza makers would remember her for wasting not only their time, but the extra pepperoni. And if several people were ahead of her—

He hadn't thought it through. The store in this plaza couldn't be the target. At Meg's, though—but she hadn't yet called for backup, so he'd probably missed there, too.

Realizing he'd been wrong suddenly made the cold colder; his feet icier, his hands number. Damn.

Might as well stop by and give her the bad news on the way in.

The Blazer skidded as he hit the highway.

The radio squeaked his name. "Come on in, genius. It's all over."

He grinned with relief and reached for the mike. "You have them both?"

"What we have is going to surprise you so much you'll be happy to get back to your carving. I'm thinking of replacing you with a Ouija board."

The first sentence told him he *had* missed something important. The second that collar-ing the supermarket bandit wasn't enough to make her stop throwing verbal darts at him for saying she sat around doing nothing.

A doll of a woman was seated

before Meg's desk, head down, hands clasped in her lap, wearing jeans, boots, and a bulky white turtleneck sweater; short and small indeed, but a competence in the face and the long, thin hands. The sketch hadn't done her justice, but only a color photo or portrait would—the subtle nuances and shadows necessary for the full impact. She'd have looked in character handing Trevane a gold card.

"Meet Mrs. Andrea Sharon, the supermarket bandit," said Meg. "She did them all, alone." A smile tugged at her lips. "You always underestimate the capabilities of women, Klauder."

He shrugged out of his parka. Still throwing darts, but the lack of her usual wrath focused on the cowering perpetrator puzzled him. Women had never escaped it before—if anything, she was harder on them than on men.

"Since she's sitting here, it seems that was the only mistake I made."

Meg smiled at the woman. "You can get mad at him if you like. He figured out what you were doing and how, except he was sure you were only helping a man."

This thing was rolling before his eyes like a TV with the vertical hold out of whack. No in-

dignation at all. Sympathy, if anything. She sympathized with lawbreakers as often as NASA sent men to the moon.

The woman's eyes flashed up to Klauder and back to the hands in her lap, the expression in them reminding him of the frightened look of a doe he'd surprised next to the cabin one morning.

Meg rose, patted her shoulder, said, "Don't worry about the baby. I sent someone to get her," and motioned Klauder out of the office.

She slid a hip onto a deserted desk as he poured himself a cup of hot coffee and held it with half-frozen hands.

"First female yuppie holdup person I've ever come across. Shows you where society is headed." She punched him lightly on the arm. "I really can't fault you for thinking someone else was involved. We might've had a clue if the woman in the gift shop and that dummy in the laundromat had had enough sense to tell us she left the baby and ran out to her car to get something. Car, hell. She used them as babysitters while she held up the markets. They never put two and two together. Why should they? Who would think that a mother would ask them to keep an eye on her baby while she ran out and committed a holdup?"

He sipped the coffee, wondering how long it would take for the hot liquid to filter down to his feet. "I would."

"Naturally," she said smugly. "If your mother came around the corner after a crime went down, she'd make your list of suspects. I'm talking *normal* people here, Klauder. But no baby tonight. She had a sitter. She parked, went into the card shop, checked to see if it was clear, and walked up to the market, pulling that turtleneck collar up over her face and the hood over her head so fast it took me by surprise. My frozen old bones wouldn't let me move fast enough to stop her—"

"You were supposed to call me for backup."

"—I don't need backup to handle a lone woman, Klauder. Zip, she was out again. Fifteen feet from the door, she was just another longhaired female shopper heading back to her car. Never occurred to us, either, that the reason the holdup never said a word was because a female voice is a female voice, no matter how it's disguised."

In the office, the woman was still staring down at her hands.

"Why?" he asked.

"We've had a long talk—"

"Long talk? How long has she been here?"

"Oh, the babysitter's sched-

ule forced her to move early tonight. I guess I picked her up about seven thirty."

"Thank you very much. Nice of you to let me freeze out there for more than an hour. Okay, we're even."

Her voice was syrupy. "Even? I have no idea of what you're talking about. I just wanted to be sure I had the right party. Anyway, her sleaze of a husband cleaned out all their assets and disappeared. Even took along the credit cards, since they were his, he said, leaving her in one of those condos with a nine-month-old baby—"

Aha. The rolling picture was slowing down. The sleaze had better have settled in the Gobi Desert, and he might not be safe from her even there.

"—Nice place to live, sure, but you can't eat it. Even if she could sell it, which she can't without his signature, it would take months, and public assistance—those people don't set any speed records, especially when someone who looks like her is across the desk."

"I thought they had things like emergency grants."

"Try getting one with an expensive condo as your address."

"No relatives?"

She sighed. "Klauder, get with it. Any option you can think of, she's been there long

before you. She's begged for help at every agency the social engineers have dreamed up, called every number in the book, and filled out every form ever created to baffle the poor and needy. And don't say she could have gotten a job. She tried until she had to sell her car for grocery money along with most of her clothes and furniture. The one she used was borrowed. And what could she do with the baby if she found one? Not many jobs where you can keep a nine-month-old around, and daycare centers around here are expensive and jammed up."

The picture steadied and cleared.

"When the sleaze cleared out, he left her with nothing. The kindness of strangers is highly overrated, Klauder. She needed money. She tried every legitimate way to get it until she ran out of options, so she got a sitter for a few hours while she held up a market. Once a month. Until some assistance came through. From somewhere. She and the kid had to eat." She paused. "Know the occupation *that* forces some women into, Klauder?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "With her looks, she'd have made far more than three hundred a month, that's for sure."

She backhanded his arm

sharply. "I should have left you out there until the store closed. Talk about people falling through the cracks—we're up to the wahzoo in social programs, yet here's a woman and infant going hungry because she doesn't qualify for this one, her papers got lost in that one, the condo kills her for another, and in general, no one gives a damn."

He looked at the bowed head of the woman. If she had to hold up supermarkets, she picked the right reason and the right county to do it in.

"Why do I think that if her story checks out you have something in mind that doesn't involve a prison sentence?"

"Oh, her story will check out. I don't get conned very often, and never by a woman. And yeah, I do have something in mind—"

"Beneath the badge on your broad bosom beats the heart of a dedicated do-gooder."

"Forget my broad bosom. The most important thing right now is to keep her and her baby together. I can do that by swearing to the D.A. and the judge that her criminal career is over because she has a job. And if I handle the rest right, she'll get probation—"

"Not in this state. Mandatory sentence for using a deadly weapon—"

Her eyes widened. "A plastic

pistol a deadly weapon, Klauder? No way."

Might be true. Andrea Sharon would have had no money for a real one, but if it hadn't been a toy, Meg had magically turned it into one.

"Where's the job coming from?"

"A car is no problem. Dealers have loaners—"

That they did. For customers. And when they were wise enough to stay on the good side of a polite sheriff in pursuit of a good cause.

"—and I know a man who not only needs a housekeeper but wouldn't be disturbed by a baby while he's carving away, making all kinds of money—"

"Hold everything." He started to retreat, but she clamped one hand on his shoulder so hard he winced.

"After all, Klauder, it's your fault she was caught. Something might have come through for her next month and the Supermarket Bandit would have been history. I think that ten dollars an hour and all she and

the kid can eat would be fair."

He opened his mouth, but before the words came, she said, "Hey, it's only temporary while I start fires under a few appropriate bureaucratic posteriors. And now that Natalie Something's gone, you have nothing else to spend your money on." She patted his shoulder gently. "I always seem to be doing something nice for you, Klauder."

"Nice for *me*?"

"She can cook. Now, consider how much you hate those frozen dinners."

Surrender sometimes carried benefits with it, as a couple of world powers had discovered. He removed her hand and smiled.

"How in the hell do you come up with these ideas?"

She threw her final dart, speaking slowly and with obvious relish, like a poker player fanning out four aces and saying "read 'em and weep" while raking in the pot.

"Oh, when a person sits around all day doing nothing, they just sort of pop up."



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are you trembling?**



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# To Rob a Bank

## by Wayne L. Tappon

Thursday, March 14  
Miss Wanda Huckaby  
P.O. Box 17  
Crooked Furrow, Arkansas

My Dearest Wanda,

First off, I think you'd better burn this letter when you finish reading it. Or if you can't bear to part with it, (ha ha) at least hide it in a safe place so your folks don't find it. I know your daddy don't think too kindly of me and wouldn't understand about my new career.

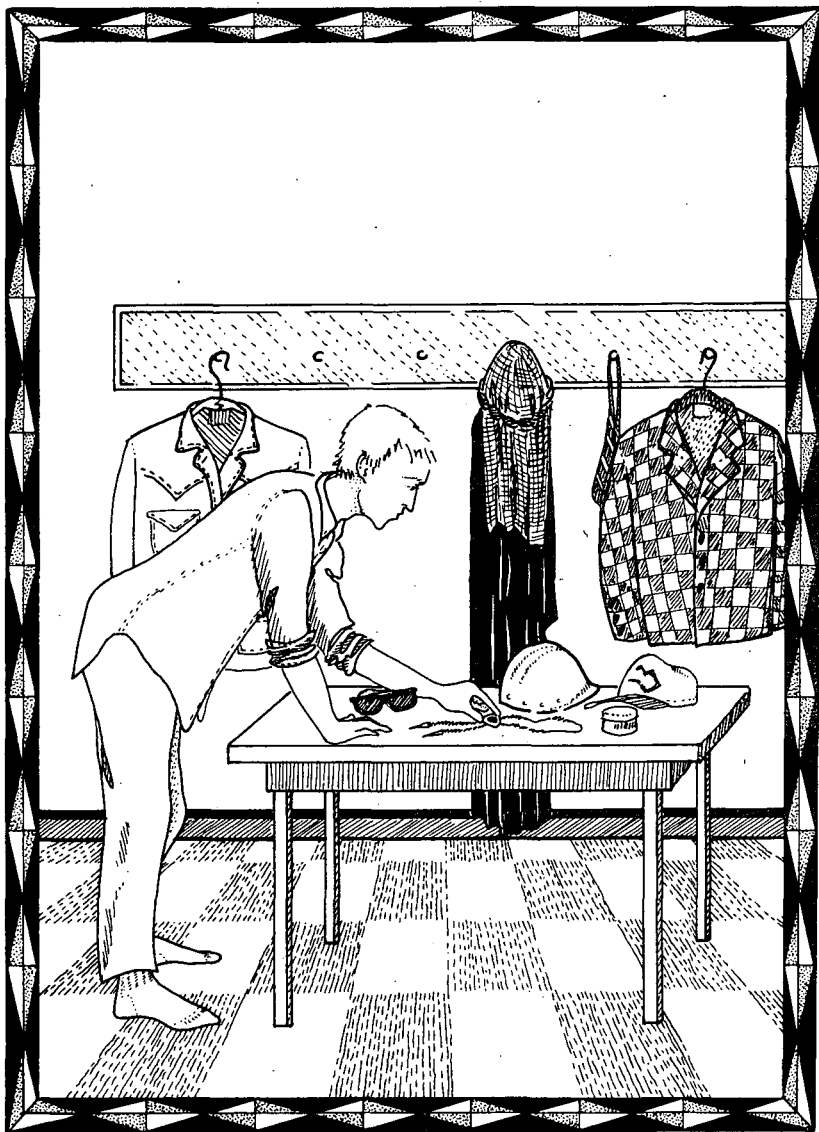
I guess this letter is like one of those "good news, bad news" jokes. (ha) Well the bad news is that I got fired from my job selling cemetery plots. Mr. Powers kept saying mean things like how I couldn't sell rice to a Chinaman and stuff like that. Boy will he be surprised when I walk in someday, slap down a stack of bills and buy the biggest funeral he's got.

I was real downhearted for a day or so. Even though it doesn't cost a lot to live here at the YMCA, I was worried about using up all the money I've been saving for us to get married with.

But now for the good news. Just when I was feeling worst, I saw this man on TV talking about how we can do anything we set our minds to, and how failure is just the doorway to success. W. Tyler Bedford, (that was his name) said we must reach within ourselves and pull out the confidence that lies dormant in all of us if we want to succeed. (He says stuff like "confidence" and "dormant" a lot.)

Well I'll tell you that what he said made so much sense that I could see my whole life changing right in front of my eyes. He said anyone who understands the secret can become rich in no time and he talked to people right there on the TV show that had already started to make their fortunes just by buying his program and following his rules.

As soon as I can get the one-hundred and eighty dollars together, I'm going to send for the cassette tapes but I got enough out of just



IF YOU'RE WEARING SOMETHING A LITTLE OUT OF THE ORDINARY THEY  
NEVER NOTICE YOUR FACE. ALL THEY REMEMBER IS THE CLOTHES.

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watching to know that by drawing on the superior intelligence that has been lying dormant in me, I can be a success.

I was so fired up, I went looking for a job the very next day filled with confidence and determination. I was sure I would get hired right off, but I think a lot of these places are scared of people with outstanding ability cause they don't want to get showed up. After a week of turndowns, I was almost discouraged again but I tuned in W. Tyler Bedford's show and he showed me where I had my wheels stuck in the same old ruts and in order to succeed really big, I'd have to climb up and hitch my wagon to a star.

W. Tyler Bedford pointed out that you can't make any real money working for other people because chances are you have got more ability than they have anyway. He says you have to think up a goal and visualize exactly how you plan to reach it. He says you must sit down with pencil and paper and make a careful plan.

I already have a goal. I want to make a lot of money fast so I can come home and show your daddy I'm not a bum so we can get married. But I don't have a plan. Yet. I just know I don't want to work in Gus Gutchell's feed store no more.

I'm too excited to say more right now. I've got to write down a plan that will make us independent of financial cares and worries as soon as I can think one up. It won't be long now till we're marching hand in hand down the aisle of the Saved From Perdition Church.

Your loving sweetheart,  
Wendell

Saturday, March 23  
Miss Wanda Huckaby  
P.O. Box 17  
Crooked Furrow, Arkansas

Wanda, My Darling,

I received your letter and have read it over and over until it is almost wore out. (ha, ha.) But it did puzzle me. If I didn't know you so well, I would have thought you weren't too enthusiastic about the advice given to me by W. Tyler Bedford. You kept calling him "that TV guy" and I didn't quite know what to make of the line, "Quit fooling around and go out and get a regular job."

Maybe I didn't explain it real good.

I know it has been more than a week since I wrote to you but I have watched W. Tyler Bedford three more times since I first saw him. At first I was surprised to see it was the exact same show I watched the first time so I guess it must have been taped cause I don't think Mr. Bedford and those others could do it exactly the same every time. But each time I watched, I understood better what I must do.

Just wanting to get married isn't enough. I needed a crystal clear goal. Well Wanda you will be delighted to know that my goal—or rather *our* goal—is now down on paper, and I know how I'm going to make that goal a reality.

I figured we'd need eight . . . maybe nine-hundred to have a real nice honeymoon and get started in our own business, but I decided to shoot the moon, (so to speak) so I dreamed of coming home with two-thousand dollars. Now don't laugh. W. Tyler Bedford says anything is possible.

At first I couldn't think of any way to reach our goal. But after the last TV show when I was sitting there thinking how much easier it would be if I had the six hours of cassettes to learn from, this old movie comes on about robbing a bank. It was called "Dog Day Afternoon," and I was thinking, Boy those guys don't know much about robbing a bank. If they'da watched W. Tyler Bedford, they'da had a better plan. And then it hit me. What better way to get money real fast than to take it from folks that have so much they probably wouldn't even miss it. Even if they didn't have insurance?

My conscience did bother me some at first but W. Tyler Bedford says there will always be people who will try to stand in the way of the successful entrepreneur and you must not allow them to keep you from your goals. (He uses "entrepreneur" a lot too, and it took me almost an hour to find it in my pocket dictionary. It means "one who organizes, manages and takes the risk for an enterprise." That's me!)

Well when it comes to standing in the way of success, Lord knows most of the people I've met in my lifetime—especially your daddy—have not showed me the respect due me, so I said, why not?

I've been as busy as a banty hen with twenty chicks working on my plan. I decided I should have some experience before I work my way up to a bank so I have been looking at possible places where

I could practice and still bring in some money to tide me over till I can hit the big time so to speak.

I've narrowed it down to either an antique store on Western or a convenience store here in Hollywood. The antique store would be easier since the lady is quite old and hard of hearing but it might not pay off too well since she hasn't had any customers since I've been watching. I've about decided on the convenience store I guess. When you hear from me next we'll be well on the road to success.

Your everloving fiancé,  
Wendell

Friday, April 5  
Miss Wanda Huckaby  
P.O. Box 17  
Crooked Furrow, Arkansas

Dear Wanda,

I had just finished putting the finishing touches on my plan to hold up the convenience store in Hollywood and was congratulating myself on a job well done when your letter arrived. I only read it once because frankly, Wanda, your negative thoughts about my new career were upsetting. I had to put them firmly out of my mind or I would have lost confidence in my goal.

My plan is now complete and by tomorrow I will be richer in both money and experience. I don't want to wait too long since there is a lot of competition in a city the size of Los Angeles and some other entrepreneur might decide to hold up *my* convenience store. (Ha, ha.) I have spent nearly two weeks going through every detail in my mind so my confidence level would be at its peak. (W. Tyler Bedford says confidence is everything.)

I can't think of a better career for a person of my temperament. Since you know me so well, you're aware that my intelligence is so much higher than most people, that I have trouble making myself understood to persons who are not my intellectual equals. Particularly bosses.

So now, I will not only experience new levels of wealth and power, I won't have to try to explain complicated concepts to those incapable of grasping them.

I guess you can tell I'm excited.

I'm anxious to get to banks but W. Tyler Bedford says, "We must first take baby steps before we can stride toward our destiny in seven league boots," so I'll start small with a small store.

Here's how careful I've been. First I laid out a pattern of careful surveillance; to get the lay of the land so to speak. I took the precaution of limiting myself to four visits and I wore different outfits every time so they wouldn't remember me.

Most of the disguises were stuff I already had in my closet, like the heavy snow boots and the black sweatsuit and the Cardinal baseball cap, but I went to Goodwill to buy the purple slacks and the blue sport coat with the large white checks. You see if you're wearing something a little out of the ordinary they never notice your face. All they remember is the clothes.

Since the convenience store closes at eleven, I thought at first that the best time to hit the place was just at closing, but my surveillance showed there are usually a flock of last minute customers and I certainly don't want a crowd of people standing around watching while I empty the cash register. I discovered there is usually a lull around 10:15 to 10:30 so my new plan calls for me to go in precisely at 10:22 and be out by 10:26. At the latest. I figured it can't possibly take more than four minutes to stuff all the money from the register in a paper sack.

Did I tell you I bought a gun? I hated to spend our savings, but in a way I guess you could call it an investment in our future. Besides it has a broken firing pin and the man at the pawnshop said it wasn't hardly worth fixing so he sold it to me for nine dollars. I told him it was for a costume party (ha ha) and I didn't intend to shoot it anyway.

I've heard that some people who do this sort of thing like to steal a car rather than use their own, but I never quite understood how you start those things without a key. I decided it would be OK to use the Edsel if I park around on the dark side of the store where no one will notice the Arkansas plates.

Well, it's past nine so I better get into my sweatsuit and sneakers which the man at the convenience store has never seen. I'll mail this on the way to "the job" and by the time you hear from me next I'll be well on my way to the big time. I expect the preacher will be tying the knot for us before the summer's over. Until then I remain,

Your everloving,  
Wendell



Wednesday, April 17  
Miss Wanda Huckaby  
P.O. Box 17  
Crooked Furrow, Arkansas

Dear Wanda,

It is getting harder and harder to focus my energies on the task of learning my new career when I get the kind of letter I got from you yesterday. I wasn't in a good mood anyway because my experience with the convenience store did not turn out in a completely positive way. But more about that later.

I'll just say I was somewhat downhearted and fighting to remember the principles of positive thinking I had learned from W. Tyler Bedford when your letter arrived. Boy! Talk about discouraging.

I know that at this time I am not in a position to forbid you to see other fellows, but I did think we had an understanding, Wanda, and I want to know what's going on between you and Seymour Swanson. Just because he's the only one in the county with a new Chevy convertible doesn't make him right for you. If *my* daddy owned the John-Deere agency, *I'd* be driving a Buick or a Pontiac. I hope you'll come to your senses and see how sad you'll be when I become a big success and you're tied down to a no chin loser like Seymour.

Well I might as well tell you about my practice venture. Things didn't go quite like I planned. In fact, nothing went right. It started to go all funny as soon as I got there.

I wanted to be facing out so I could make a fast getaway, so I backed the Edsel in at the side of the building like I planned. I swear I never saw that trash dumpster but it *was* pretty dark back there. Then that creepy old night clerk came running out with his flashlight to see if his precious dumpster was OK. As if he owned it for crying out loud.

I was going to call it quits then and there but I remembered what W. Tyler Bedford said about quitters and winners so I decided to go ahead anyway. I don't think that old man got a good look at my car since he was making such a fuss over the dumpster.

I was already behind schedule by now and as luck would have it, right after we went inside, some bikers came piling in looking to buy beer. They couldn't just get a couple six packs like normal people though. Oh no. They had to have a case. And it had to be cold so the old guy had to go hobbling into the back to fetch it out

for them. I went over by the magazines and pretended to read a comic book so no one would notice me. But when they counted out their money, those bikers came up short, and the one with the swastika earring and the red bandanna around his head came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, buddy. We need thirty-eight more cents to buy the beer. You wouldn't mind helping us out, would you?"

Well now normally I'd have told him where he could go and what he could do but I didn't think I should call attention to myself just then. Particularly if the guy got smart and I had to deck him. Besides he did outweigh me by seventy or eighty pounds and if he got in a lucky punch, they might have discovered the gun and wrecked my plan.

"Thirty-eight cents?" I unzipped the little pouch I had strapped around my waist since the sweatsuit I was wearing didn't have any pockets. I told him, "I don't think I have any pennies," and gave him a dollar just to get rid of him.

By the time they finally went roaring off, it was past ten-thirty and I was beginning to worry about the last minute rush.

I stood at the magazine rack trying to decide whether or not to call off the holdup because by now my time schedule was all messed up. But just when I was focusing all my mental powers on an alternate plan—like leaving—the fool clerk said, "You gonna buy that thing? This isn't the public library you know."

Well, Wanda, that upset me so much I decided I had to teach him a few things about manners. I tossed the comic book back at the rack and let it slide down onto the floor to show him he didn't realize who he was fooling with. I wheeled toward the counter, reaching for the gun which I'd stuck in the waistband of the sweat pants. It was just rotten luck that the hammer got stuck in the drawstring and when I tried to use both hands to free it, the damn gun slid down my pants leg. It was lucky I'd decided to wear the running outfit instead of the dark blue suit, or it would have slid right out on the floor. As it was, the gun stopped when it hit the elastic down by my ankle.

There was that split second when I was trying to decide whether to untie the drawstring and reach all the way down inside the pants leg to retrieve the revolver or try to work it out past the elastic at the bottom when I looked up and saw the guy smirking at me past that little Hitler mustache.

He looked me up and down and said, "How come you're not

wearing your flashy sport coat tonight, Mr. Knopp?" He pronounced it Ka-nopp. I wanted to yell at him that the "K" was silent, but then it hit me that he'd called me by name.

Well you could have knocked me over with a feather. I just stood there wondering how he could possibly have known my name and all of a sudden it came to me. The day I wore the sport coat and the purplish slacks, I'd wanted to act like the kind of sophisticated guy that would dress like that, so I'd bought a whole gallon jug of Gallo Chenin Blanc and being a little short of cash, I'd paid for it with the Master Charge card I sent for when I worked at the Feed Store.

Boy! Talk about feeling dumb!

But I didn't panic. Obviously he hadn't seen the gun but I realized that if I went ahead with my plan to hold up the store, there was a good chance he could identify me later, so I just gave him a look that stopped him cold and said, "I don't believe my social life is any of your concern and I think I've been kept waiting just about long enough. If you're not too busy, maybe you can tell me how much I owe."

"Owe for what? You haven't bought anything yet."

I'll admit I was just a little rattled but I don't think he noticed. I just glanced around nonchalantly and said, "Oh, I must have dropped my periodical. Yes. There it is on the floor."

I'm sure he wasn't aware that the reason I walked so stiffly was due to the fact that the gun was banging me on the ankle with every step.

I picked up the comic book, returned to the counter and said with cool presence, "How much is this?"

He leaned his elbows on the counter and grinned at me like a big baboon. "A little light reading tonight? I'd have figured you for something more intellectual like the National Enquirer."

Well it's been my experience that the best way to treat people who don't know their place, is to just speak to them firmly in a dignified manner so they understand what's what. I ignored his petty outburst and repeated my question. "I believe I asked you how much my magazine is. I don't have all night." Quiet but forceful.

The man shook his balding head. He was looking down his nose as if he thought he was better than me and I decided that when he still had his hair, he probably *had* looked like Hitler.

He smirked again. "The 'Captain Marvel' is a buck twenty-five."

I reached in my bag and pulled out a dollar bill and then realized it was the last money I had. I'd expected to pick up plenty of cash from him and so I'd given my only other dollar to the fat slob with the Harley. I was too embarrassed to admit I didn't even have enough money for the comic book, but fortunately the old crank gave me an out with his next ill mannered outburst. He said, "With tax, that comes to a dollar thirty-three."

I drew myself up to my full height—which as you know, Wanda, really isn't all that high—and told him, "I don't care for your attitude. I'm surprised you have any customers left at all. I intend to take my business to another establishment."

I was real pleased with the cool way I had handled a difficult situation, but as I strode defiantly away, the elastic band on the ankle of my sweat suit snapped and the gun began to slither out onto the floor. I squatted down quickly to capture it and looked up to see a police officer politely holding the door open for me. All I could do was stuff the revolver back up my pants leg and hold it with both hands as I duck walked out into the parking lot.

It was an awkward moment but I had the cool presence of mind to smile up at the officer as I exited. "Cramp," I explained.

Boy! When things go wrong!

But you know, Wanda, that I am a person who believes that even negative experiences have value if we can learn what improvements we need to make in future endeavors. I have reviewed this unfortunate incident and have decided that my next venture will have to be planned even more carefully. I must tighten my time schedule and spend even more time in surveillance so I can anticipate and cope with any eventuality.

In spite of your letter, I have regained my confidence and am hard at work planning my next job. I have decided to utilize the experience I have gained and go where the money is. I have decided I'm ready for a bank!

I hope when you read this you will realize what a mistake you would be making to get involved with someone like spindly little Seymour Swanson. I forgive you for calling me a noodle-headed nincompoop and I am confident that when I have succeeded in my next business venture that you will welcome me back with open arms.

Your loving fiancée,  
Wendell

Monday, May 6  
Miss Wanda Huckaby  
P.O. Box 17  
Crooked Furrow, Arkansas

Dear Wanda,

Your letter was forwarded to me here at the County Jail and all I can say is I hope you know what you're doing. I suppose I ought to congratulate you and Seymour but you can see why it is hard for me. I only hope you don't get hurt by that would-be playboy. However I think you should know, Wanda, that two can play at that game. You're not the only one who is attractive to persons of the opposite sexual persuasion. But more about that later.

I suppose you have guessed by now that the bank job didn't go so well. It seemed like there was a period of time when every little thing just went wrong. And that includes your getting engaged to Seymour just when I was hoping you could get your daddy to cough up a few hundred dollars for bail money. There was a spell there when I almost lost my positive attitude.

But I must not blame myself. The plan was good and should have worked. I will tell you about it so you will agree that it wasn't my fault and you will not think of me as some kind of a dumbbell.

Robbing a bank requires the highest degree of intelligence and discipline—qualities I am proud to say I possess to an unusual degree. There is no comparison between a bank and a convenience store so I had to develop a more sophisticated approach.

I discarded my early crude attempts at disguise and assembled costumes more appropriate to a bank. My personal favorite was the wealthy oilman outfit with the red string tie, although I never did get completely comfortable walking in high heel boots. A white Stetson would have been nice but Goodwill didn't have one so I used a snapbrim hat pulled down in front like Howard Hughes used to wear.

I also rented an Arab sheik costume from a little theater place and they showed me how to apply makeup to darken my skin and cover the freckles.

Of course this was just for close up surveillance and evaluation of bank personnel. Since I was working alone, I had to interview all the tellers and find the weakest link in the chain. On my fourth visit to get change for a twenty, (no more credit cards for me, Wanda) I noticed an employee who didn't look like she'd give me

any trouble. According to her name plate, her name was Winifred and she seemed perfect.

Winifred was small and shy. She couldn't look me in the eye and so I was sure she wouldn't remember me even though I was wearing my tool belt and my hard hat. I tested her for cooperation by saying, "I'd like change for this twenty, please."

Right off she looked at me shyly and said, "How would you like that, sir?" so I knew she wouldn't panic when the big moment came. There was usually a big rush at noon and then a kind of lull, so I planned to walk up to her window at precisely 1:38 p.m. Unless there was a line.

Now Wanda I knew there was a guard with a gun but he was pretty old and I didn't figure he'd shoot me unless he thought I was going to shoot him, so I thought I'd leave the gun in my pocket where he wouldn't see it and just hand Winifred a note. I had worked hard on the note to get just the right feeling. I wanted her to mind me but I didn't want her so scared she'd faint or something. The note I handed her said:

Dear Miss Winifred,

Please put all your money in a paper bag and give it to me. Do not yell or faint or push any buttons because I do not wish to harm you. But I have a gun hid under my coat and I will use it if you force me to.

Winifred read my note and blushed. She looked up at me out of the corner of her eye and said, "How would you like that, sir?"

When she saw my expression she laughed and leaned over to whisper, "That's just a little joke. Like what I said to you last week when you came in to change a twenty."

Well I don't mind telling you I was flabbergasted. That girl had seen through my disguise, and even though I now had on my best Montgomery Ward suit and a hand painted tie, she recognized me right off. I was ready to pretend I was just joking and forget the whole thing but before I could say anything, Winifred leaned over and whispered, "Where's your paper sack?"

I said, "I thought you'd have one."

"No," she said, "we don't usually keep them back here."

She turned to the next teller and said, "Lucy, do you happen to have a paper sack back there?"

Lucy glanced over and said, "No, I had a McDonald's sack at

lunchtime but I threw it away in the employee's lounge. Do you want me to go get it?"

Well I was beginning to feel very conspicuous and I was trying to look confident like W. Tyler Bedford preached but I could feel the blood climbing up into my face. I didn't know just what to do. Winifred was being so helpful I didn't want to just turn and run so I just stood there.

Winifred said, "See if any of the other tellers have a paper sack, would you?" so Lucy turned and yelled out, "Has anyone got a paper sack?"

Well naturally everyone turned to look and I could have just died. One of the tellers called out, "What do you want it for, Lucy?"

Lucy says, "It's not for me. Winifred needs one."

Another girl hollers down, "How big a one do you need, Winnie? Is this one big enough?" And she holds up this little bitty sack that wouldn't hardly hold a penny's worth of candy, and Winifred called back, "No, I'm going to need something bigger."

Then the little old lady in the next line speaks up. "I guess I could lend you the knitting bag I brought my deposit in, Dear, but I'd need it back before tomorrow. Can you get it back to me?"

Winifred smiles sweetly and says, "Why that's very generous of you, Mrs. Weisman, but I think my customer wants something he can keep."

Just then I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned around and there's the old guard. "I don't have a paper sack but if you want to wrap something up, you can use my newspaper."

"Maybe I'll just come back tomorrow," I mumbled, and started to leave, but Winifred reached out and touched my arm. There was a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. "Wait right here," she said. "I'll be right back."

I wanted to just walk out, Wanda, but by then everyone was being so friendly it would have seemed rude. The guard was gabbing away a mile a minute but I was too preoccupied to hear a word he was saying. Mrs. Weisman was advising me to get a nice knitting bag and the girl down at the end of the teller line kept asking, "How big a bag do you need?"

Just then the bank manager came waddling up following his paunch. He put on a smile you could pour in a crankcase and shoved out his hand. "My name is Frank Nelson. I'm the manager here and I take it you're making a sizable withdrawal."

I could tell by the way he was looking at the mustard I'd spilled



on my tie that he didn't think much of my outfit. All I could do was try to bluff it out. "Why yes sir. I was hoping to take out quite a lot."

"Well that's fine. Just fine," Frank said. His eyes were like copper beebees floating in buttermilk. "I usually try to supervise all large transactions. Just how much were you planning to withdraw?"

Before I could think of a good answer, Winifred came back smoothing the wrinkles out of a white sack with golden arches on it. She stopped when she saw Frank. "Oh, Mr. Nelson," she said, "I was just getting this gentleman a sack."

"Of course, Miss Winters. And while you're doing that, may I see his withdrawal slip?"

I could see Winifred fingering my note so I knew it was time to take firm and decisive action. I reached under my coat and pulled out the revolver with the broken firing pin and wheeled on the old guard. "All right! Take that gun out slowly," I said, "and lay it right there on the floor."

Mr. Carruthers—that was the name on his name tag—looked like he was about to cry but he did what I said while I made Frank Nelson hold up his hands. "Now, Miss Winifred, you just take all that money and stuff it in that sack, and don't nobody try to stop me."

Winifred's eyes were glistening with excitement as she filled the sack from her drawer. "Do you want the loose change, too?" she asked.

"No, just hand over what you've got there, and everybody step back."

I was keeping an eye on old Frank and the guard as I turned toward the door and then Whammo! And Wanda, that's all I remember.

When I came to, I was lying on the floor with my hands cuffed behind me and a headache as big as Pine Bluff. The cops stuffed me into a patrol car when they seen I was awake and took me down and booked me for armed robbery. I tried to tell them the gun wouldn't work even if it had bullets but they said in California it don't matter anyway.

I've been here nearly two weeks but Winifred has been to see me almost every day. She keeps bringing me cigarettes even though I don't smoke. She says they'll help me make new friends.

Oh, oh! I hear them coming with the leg irons and handcuffs. My hearing is this morning and I'll have to finish this later.

Tuesday, May 7

Well, Wanda, I'm back. I am finishing this letter from my old room at the YMCA. My trial was an embarrassing experience and it was almost enough to make me want to turn to a different line of work.

All the people from the bank were there and they testified to my disguises as an Arab sheik, and a wealthy oilman, a construction worker, and a Hell's Angel biker, and the judge kept getting all red in the face trying not to laugh. I was really surprised that they remembered me in the biker rig. I think an earring might have made the difference, but at the time I thought I might be going home to Crooked Furrow some day and I knew I didn't show up with my ears pierced or I'd get laughed right out of town.

When they told the part about Mrs. Weisman hitting me over the head with her knitting bag full of wrapped coins, the judge let out a snort like a razorback hog and got all red in the face. Of course everyone else was whooping and cackling so that gave him an excuse to pound on the desk with his little mallet and warn folks they should act respectful in a court of law.

About then the Public Defender pointed out the gun didn't really work and that I had no criminal record, and he claimed I was driven to my deed by the cruel society that prevented me from getting a job I so desperately wanted and needed.

The judge said anyone could see I was not a very professional criminal and asked me if I'd promise not to hold up any more banks if he gave me probation. Of course I gave my word and that's how come I'm out.

Winifred drove me home and then stayed and talked almost all night. I told her all about W. Tyler Bedford and she agrees with I and him one-hundred percent. She says she can see I have the ability to reach any goal and that all I need is encouragement. Then we talked about you and me, and about you and Seymour Swanson. Winifred says not to be sad about losing you because she feels I'm too big for a town the size of Crooked Furrow anyway.

She told me not to be downhearted because things didn't go well at the bank. She says I have a talent for making big money but I just need someone to help me fine tune the planning. She has volunteered to help me.

I reminded her that I had promised the judge not to hold up no more banks, and Winifred said, "Oh, pooh. He probably didn't mean it and besides banks have cameras." Winifred says if we

want to get ahead fast, we should hold up a money cashing store. According to her, they have twice as much money as banks since most of them have started laundering drug money. Winifred already has a .38 that really shoots but she says it's probably best if I get another gun that don't work.

So I guess this is good-bye, Wanda. I don't like to rub it in, but you had your chance and now you'll have to live with your choice. I won't say we'll never see each other again. You never can tell what might happen. If you look up someday and see a Rolls Royce driving through Crooked Furrow, run up and look in the window. It will probably be,

Your ex-fiance,  
Wendell

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*(continued from page 4)*

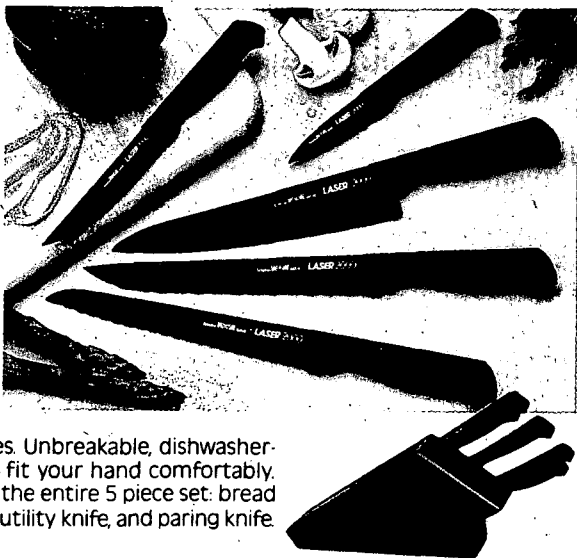
actually) by Mary Cannon, who wrote "Booked & Printed" from its inception in 1982 till early 1989 and has been a twice-yearly reviewer for us since.

We welcome Mary back, we thank Carol enormously and wish her all the best, and we hope the stories herein entertain you through these end-of-year long nights.

# MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

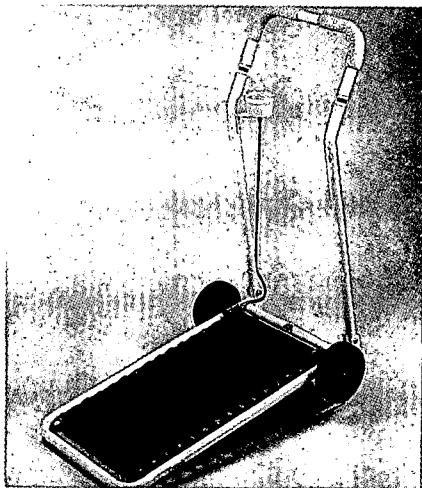
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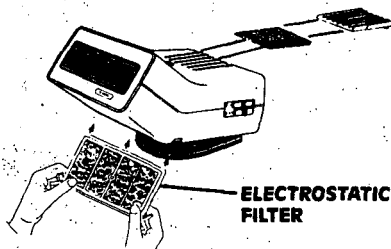
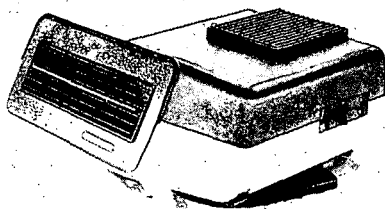
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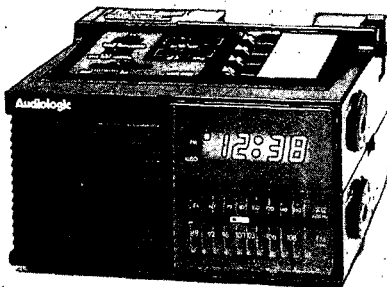
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# Many Are the Traps of the Crafty

by Robert Wm. Klein

“**I**t’s Devil’s Night tonight, Pops,” Crazy Joe said to me at the edge of Hobb’s Woods where he sometimes slept. “Don’t let the devil burn your house down tonight.”

Crazy Joe still wore the red toboggan cap and scarf I’d given him the week before when the temperature had unseasonably plunged to freezing. I’d half expected him to have pawned them by now for the price of a bottle of Mad Dog.

“Devil’s Night or not, it’s gonna be cold tonight, Joe,” I said. “Why don’t you head for the shelter downtown?”

“I found me a shelter, Pops, and it ain’t downtown,” Crazy Joe said, casting an eye back at the woods. “Nice warm shelter. Nice warm. But I gotta watch out for the devil tonight. Don’t want him to catch me.”

“We don’t want the devil to catch any of us,” I said.

I read a lot of poetry. It fills the hours better than watching the trash they show on television nowadays. My favorite poets are the old dependables—Tennyson, Poe, Longfellow. None of this modern junk that eschews rhyme, meter, and meaning. Give me the old masters every time. They touch upon the truths of life.

Tennyson, for instance. He sums up my longings for Muriel exactly: “But O, for the touch of a vanished hand, And the sound of a voice that is still!”

It’s been ten years since Muriel died. She was my wife, a true helpmate and a comfort to me.

It sounds callous, but I miss her most in the mornings when I’m preparing for my paper route. Muriel would always be up and waiting for me at four o’clock in the morning when I’d return home from the pickup site with stacks of the day’s *Herald-Trumpet* still smelling of fresh ink and pulp paper. She’d have the coffee brewed and poured, and she’d help me roll the papers and pack them into my double-pouched carrier bag. And then, like a squire assisting his armor-burdened knight, she’d help me lift that fully-laden carrier bag up over my head and onto my shoulders. Unlike the medi-



THE HOUSE LOOKED DIFFERENT. THE GLOW, WHICH WAS STEADY BUT DIM,  
CAME FROM WITHIN IT.

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eval squire, she'd kiss me on the cheek as I set out the door to walk my route and throw my papers.

Nowadays, I have a Mr. Coffee machine that gurgles and brews my coffee while I'm at the pickup site, and I roll and pack my papers alone. I fill the carrier bag as it sits upon the kitchen counter and then I crouch down, stick my head through the yoke, and wriggle the bag into place on my shoulders. Sometimes I can even avoid knocking over the coffee cup or the chair while putting the bag on. I just don't have the strength to lift it by myself. The awkwardness of it all makes me feel like a contortionist, but at my age I should be proud of my flexibility.

I'll be seventy-three years old at the end of the year.

I don't need the paper route, mind you. That is, I don't need the money it brings in. I just enjoy the work. It gives me a sense of discipline and makes me feel useful. Every day, seven days a week, I wake up at three thirty so I can go out and throw my papers. My alarm clock, a trusty wind-up model with a luminous face and a loud tick, is set for three thirty-five, but I never need it. I'm used to the early hours. I've risen at this hour for almost thirty years now.

Of course, in the beginning we needed the money, Muriel and I. The factory had closed and the handyman's job just didn't cut it with the bills. We had three kids in high school and two in grade school—all of them eating like horses—and we had a mortgage to meet. So, rather than have Muriel go out to work, I took a second job in the early mornings throwing papers for the *Herald-Trumpet*.

I know, it was old fashioned of us—chauvinistic of me, say my daughters—for Muriel to stay home, but that's the way we were in those days. Mothers stayed home with their kids, fathers worked, married couples stayed married, and kids were a helluva lot happier and healthier. Not like today. Today we live in the age of the two-career family, the age of the neglected child.

In the afternoons, when I get too restless to read, I take long walks through the neighborhood, as if my route in the mornings isn't enough exercise for an old bird like me. It's like walking through a ghost town—empty houses, deserted driveways, a burglar's paradise. Mommies and daddies are at work, the kids are at school or daycare, and Fido is chasing his tail in the back yard. The only traffic in the street—hell, the only sign of human life—is the postman shuttling his jeep from mailbox to mailbox; you can hear his approach from blocks away, and if you listen closely, you

can hear the clockwork *clink-clunk, clink-clunk* of the mailboxes opening and shutting.

It's a different world today.

I try not to think about it because it makes me blue, but the paper route and the poetry are really all I have left now. Muriel is gone, my kids and the grandkids have all moved out of state—except for my fool son Francis—and I retired long ago from the handyman's job.

My kids all say I should retire from the *Herald-Trumpet*, too.

"Are you still out walking in the cold and the dark?" Chrissie says whenever she calls. "C'mon, Dad, you're getting too old for that stuff. Why don't you move down to Florida? You know you can stay with Jack and me and the kids."

Well, I'm not moving to Florida. Muriel and I moved here when we first married fifty years ago, and this is my home and I intend to be buried by Muriel's side. And as long as I can walk and throw papers and not get so senile I forget the addresses I'll keep my route, thank you.

So then Chrissie will call Francis and remind him to drop by often and keep an eye on me. As if Francis is capable of watching over anything other than his plants and his computers. I'm the one who keeps an eye on him.

Even Slattery, my district manager, has hinted I should quit.

"Don't you think it's time to slow down, Pops?" he asked me one morning at the pickup site.

"You want me to quit, Bingo?" I said, using the nickname he went by as a teenager when I trained him on his first paper route. "Have my customers been complaining? Have I been missing houses, not meeting my six o'clock delivery deadline?"

"No, Pops, no. I'm just thinking of you." Bingo got my route shortened. A lot less walking for me now, as well as less money. "Just thinking of you, Pops."

But like I said, I don't keep the route because of the money.

You see, there's something invigorating about walking in the dark of the pre-dawn hours. It makes me feel close to the neighborhood. I walk right up to the front doors of the sleeping households—it's a point of honor for me that all my customers receive their *Herald-Trumpet* on the porch, within easy reach, not on the lawns or in the bushes—and I feel an affinity for the slumbering inhabitants. I recognize their cars, and I know when they have visitors and when they're on vacation. I check the growth of their

children by the evolution of the toys left in the front yards—tri-cycles and beachballs give way to bicycles and basketballs, and finally one day there's an extra car on the driveway and I know the kids have grown up. I see houses improved upon, rebuilt and repainted. I see houses deteriorate, too, shedding their good looks and their dignity like an old friend succumbing to Alzheimer's. People move away, people die, new folks arrive to replace them. It's an eternal cycle.

I'm witness to the cycles of nature as well.

I watch the changing of the seasons; the waxing and waning of the moon, the slow shifting of stars in their celestial positions. I've walked in the oven-dry heat of droughts when even the night air doesn't cool. I've seen the first snowfalls of the year delicately drifting to earth, winking in the halos of street lights, and I've watched the trees bud out in springtime like a green slow-motion explosion. I've slipped on ice in the winter and on wet leaves in the fall. I've thrown my papers in blizzards and in downpours. Back in August I even saw a meteor shower over the city; for about ten seconds the sky was streaked with white lights like Lucifer falling, streaks marking the descent and death of outer space visitors. They seemed so close I thought I heard them hitting the ground in Hobb's Woods. And on clear mornings, when I've thrown my last paper and my carrier bag is reduced to a feather's weight, I've strolled back home as the sun, still below the horizon, transforms the eastern sky into a cathedral window with tints of rose and pink.

I still almost expect Muriel to be waiting for me at home, with a second cup of coffee in her hand and a hot breakfast of bacon, eggs, and oatmeal sitting on my plate at the table. But the house is empty, always empty, so I pour my own coffee and fix myself a bowl of bran flakes. On cold mornings I warm the milk before I add it to the cereal.

Crazy Joe disappeared as quickly as he had appeared, swallowed up by the shadows of Hobb's Woods. Joe was one of the few people I would meet in the mornings. He wasn't a customer, obviously, and sometimes I wouldn't see him for months at a time. Other times he could be a nuisance, like an over-friendly dog, following me for blocks. On those days I'd put him to work, let him carry some of my papers for me. Then I'd slip him a couple of bucks. He was a sad case.

As I continued my route, I puzzled over why Crazy Joe would

prefer sleeping outdoors on nights like this when at a shelter he could depend upon three hots and a cot.

So tonight is Devil's Night, I thought as I twisted an arm around to grab a paper from my back pouch. October thirtieth, the night before Halloween. The Eve of All Hallows Eve, so to speak. This is the night firemen dread, the night teenagers and arsonists set fires to derelict buildings. This bizarre "tradition"—another sad sign of our times—seems to have originated in Detroit, but isn't limited to that burg. Even in our small city authorities have had to battle more suspicious fires on this night than at any other time of the year.

The only thing that might keep the arsonists at bay was the record cold spell, said the very issue of the *Herald-Trumpet* I was throwing that morning. The freezing temperatures and light snows might serve some purpose other than to make me uncomfortable, I thought as I tried to work the stiffness out of my fingers.

A thin layer of snow clung to the lawns I walked across. Except for its brilliant whiteness, it might have been just a heavy frost. I remembered to use the sidewalk to reach Mrs. Irena's porch; she objected to my tracking up the snow in her yard each year. I try to cater to my customers' whims. Like the Gilhooleys: they want their paper delivered to their back door. It's out of my way, but I do it. And like I said, all my customers get their papers "porched." If you do a job, do it right; that's the one lesson I hope I taught my kids well.

I reached the end of Azalea Street. My route had been changed over Labor Day weekend, a fairly routine situation—routes are always being merged, divided, or adjusted. My next street was now Dahlia, and the fastest way there was to cut through Hobb's Woods along one of its footpaths. I flicked on my flashlight and entered the woods.

The woods were larger when I was younger, but over the past twenty years new housing developments have encroached upon the trees and shrunk the forest to a strip of land about one mile long and a quarter-mile wide. I remember taking the kids into the woods when they were little to hunt for mushrooms. I guess that's how Francis first started his fungus collection. Hobb's Woods has always been a breeding ground for lichen and fungus and all kinds of fuzz that grows on rocks and trees—something about the damp and the dark, Francis says.

Last time Chrissie and Jack were here I took the grandkids into the woods. They didn't like it. Gave 'em the creeps. I hadn't been in the woods for years myself, and the funny thing is, it gave me the creeps, too.

Especially the house in the woods.

I'd never noticed the house before, not in all the years I've lived here. It was a small house, more of a one story cabin really, and I guess it was easy to miss back when the woods were bigger. Perhaps it was at one time a hunters' lodge of some kind, although I don't remember much hunting ever done in Hobb's Woods.

I discovered the house Labor Day weekend, the first time I cut through the woods. I'll admit, it startled me that morning. I didn't expect anything to be there, and the house just loomed up like a dark blot in the middle of a clearing about twelve yards to the right of the footpath. I'm used to seeing new homes and shopping centers sprout up like mushrooms, seemingly overnight, on long-vacant lots, but this house was apparently an ancient structure, gray and crumbling, with its windows and door boarded up.

I played my flashlight over the house that first morning, but an odd reluctance, a feeling of something's being wrong, kept me from exploring further. I had my papers to throw, I told myself. Dahlia was my last street, and then I could sit down to breakfast.

But that afternoon, in the daylight of my customary walk, I found myself—unintentionally, I believed—at the edge of Hobb's Woods. Even then, at summer's end, the woods smelled dank. I walked by some of the neighborhood children who were enjoying their last weekend before school, playing cowboys and Indians—or maybe astronauts and aliens—among the trees by the street, where the crosshatching of foliage wasn't heavy enough to block out all the sun.

The clearing in which the house sat was hidden by heavy growth until you came right upon it. It was an odd clearing—round and devoid of vegetation, almost like a fairy ring. There weren't any discernible property lines around the building, just that circular clearing. The house squatted in the exact center of the circle, an ugly pile of rotten-looking wood. "House" was perhaps too elegant a word for it; it was really a shotgun shack that couldn't have had more than three or four rooms to it. Its roof sagged in, its sides bulged out; it looked as if it had dropped from the sky. A child might have expected the striped legs of the Wicked Witch of the East to be sticking out from under its foundations.

The house gave off a mouldering smell, like leather that's lain in the damp for too long. The boards across the windows and the single door in front that was the only entrance to the building seemed as ancient and gray as the wood of the walls. The nails were encrusted with rust the color of dried blood. I pressed my hand against the wall; it gave beneath the pressure, releasing a small cloud of dust. I withdrew my hand and wiped it on my coat. It was amazing that the house was still standing; it seemed more a growth of soft vegetative matter than a manmade structure. But then wood is vegetative matter, isn't it? And this wood was crumbling back into the earth of its origins.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," I said aloud as I kicked a corner of the foundation and left a gouge in the wall.

The place gave me the creeps, but at least, I thought, having examined it in daylight, I wouldn't be bothered walking past it in the dark each morning.

The kids were still playing on the edge of the woods as I headed home. "Hansel, Gretel, where are you?" one child called out to two others, and I smiled to think that not all the fairy tales of old had been replaced by Star Wars and Ninja Turtles.

It also occurred to me it was a good thing the house was nailed shut. For some reason it reminded me of a derelict refrigerator with its door chained shut to prevent children from locking themselves into it.

I'd meant to replace the batteries in my flashlight, which had been growing dim lately. But by now I'd been cutting through Hobb's Woods for almost two months and the footpath was as familiar to me as the sidewalks on either side of the woods.

But the familiarity didn't make walking past the house in the woods any easier. I always felt like I was walking past a graveyard. And I can't whistle to save my life. Some mornings I could swear the house was breathing. Its walls seemed to expand and contract ever so slightly as I passed; I could almost hear it wheezing.

The footpath is wide enough so I can walk along the middle without branches and brambles tugging at me or my carrier bag. But the path narrows just before it reaches the clearing, and I always blunder into a low-lying branch at that point.

That morning the branch knocked my flashlight out of my hand, breaking whatever tenuous link there was between batteries and bulb. No amount of rattling would make it work for me.

But the woods weren't as dark as I'd expected. The path before me seemed illuminated by a faint glow, almost a phosphorescence. The glow came from the clearing ahead. I stepped forward. The house looked different. The glow, which was steady but dim, came from within it. The front door was open.

"What the devil . . . ?"

Now how long had that door been open, I wondered. Surely, I'd have noticed before this morning. Was the house inhabited? I could just make out some of the house's interior—a chair slid up under a table, a mirror on the wall, some kind of camp bed or cot in a corner, and all suffused with a light that was not electrical. It was a cold light that reminded me of the face on my alarm clock.

I didn't venture off the footpath. The reach of the house's light did not extend beyond the clearing that encircled it, and for some reason I didn't want to step within that enchanted fairy ring.

I must have stood gaping several minutes before I realized that of course the house was inhabited. Some hobo or tramp was holed up in there, with a kerosene lantern no doubt. Of course. Could this be the shelter Crazy Joe had referred to a few minutes ago?

"Hey, Joe," I called in a wavering voice. "That you, Joe?"

Only silence answered me.

On a cold morning like this, even that wretched house would look warm and inviting to a homeless person. Especially if it were furnished, no matter how sparsely.

Warmth. The very word reminded me that I was shivering. The temperature was near freezing, and I felt it bad if I didn't keep moving. My circulation isn't what it used to be: the older I get, the worse the cold affects me. My hands and feet were numb and heavy. A warm place to sit and stretch would be most welcome now, I thought.

No sooner did I think that than a wave of warm air hit me in the face. I shed one glove and held up a bare hand. Sure enough, a warm breeze was blowing from the circle—from the house at the center of the circle—like hot air from a heating vent.

"Well, I'll be . . ." I addressed the house: "Is my wish your command? What else can you do for me?"

But I had no time to stop or step into the house. Not even to warm up. My customers were expecting their papers. Duty first. I fumbled my glove back on and turned to leave.

That's when I smelled it.

Funny thing about our sense of smell. It's probably the most



acute yet underrated of our five senses. Scientists say we can distinguish hundreds of different odors, some almost subliminal, and all capable of triggering intense, all-but-forgotten memories and of setting off long chains of vivid thoughts.

It was a simple smell, a homey, comfortable smell that wafted with the warm air from the house. The smell of oatmeal.

Oatmeal . . . and the images it evoked came instantaneously. Milk and sugar, cinnamon and maple syrup. Muriel at the stove, frying bacon and eggs. Sky-blue bowls full of hot, creamy cereal and side dishes of strawberries in season. The kids banging about in the bathroom upstairs or sitting at the breakfast table, chattering and fighting over the funny pages, Muriel shooing them off to catch the schoolbus. The two of us alone for a few stolen moments of love before I have to go to work. The kids grown up, Muriel and I lingering over our second or third cup of coffee, the radio turned low to a classical station, the sun peeking through the kitchen curtains. Muriel and I. Muriel. Oh, sweet God in heaven, how I miss that woman!

I was halfway across the clearing before I roused myself from my reveries. I was almost to the door of the house. I saw myself in the mirror on the wall inside: an old man, wrapped and bundled like a papoose against the cold, stooped under the weight of a double pouch hanging in front and back, looking like a turtle and feeling like a pregnant woman with a backpack. An absurd figure, an old guy who should never risk taking himself too seriously. The mirror didn't show the tears in my eyes.

"Tears, idle tears," I murmured under my breath. "Thinking of the days that are no more."

I walked away. A sigh, almost of disappointment, rose from behind me. Just the wind in the trees.

In another two minutes I was on the sidewalks of Dahlia Street, throwing my papers under the impersonal gaze of the street lights.

"Devil's Night, indeed," I said out loud to a dark-colored cat as it bounded out of my way.

The sun broke through the haze that afternoon, nudging the temperature up a bit, so I walked back to Hobb's Woods to see the house again. Water was dripping from trees and eaves, and the few patches of snow to escape the sun's rays lay in shadows and declivities.

I jumped when I saw the house. The front door was not open; not only was it closed but it was boarded up, exactly as it had always

been boarded up. I walked right up to the door and pulled at the boards. They were soft and crumbly, like the rest of the house, but they held. And they were the same gray boards, crisscrossed and attached with the same rusted nails, as had always been there. I peeked through a chink in the boards at one of the windows. The house was empty, with not a stick of furniture anywhere.

Had I been hallucinating that morning? Surely, I'd seen the door open, I'd seen a light on and furniture inside, I'd felt heat and smelt oatmeal cooking. Or was it all a dream? Is this senility? Second childhood? No, not senility, I told myself. Not for me. I'd always been too sharp for such an end. There must be some other explanation.

I fixed a light dinner for myself that evening, topped off with a hot toddy heavy with whisky, and went to bed early.

The weatherman was right. It snowed again that night, and the thermometer dipped to twenty-eight. The roads were encased in ice when I got up, and it was a slow drive to the pickup site for my papers.

"It's too icy for you to be walking out there, Pops," Bingo said to me. "Why don't you drive your route, throw the papers from your car?"

"Can't porch the papers from the car. My throwing arm's not what it used to be. I'll be okay, Bingo. I'm a tough bird."

"Just thinking of you, Pops."

I slipped and slid all over the sidewalks that morning, but luckily kept my balance. I remembered not to disturb Mrs. Irena's snow, and I successfully navigated to the Gilhooleys' back door. Getting too old? Ridiculous! I was as strong and as stable as ever.

When I reached the end of Azalea Street, I realized I still hadn't fixed my flashlight. I debated whether to cut through Hobb's Woods or to take the long way around to Dahlia. The cold decided for me. I took the shortcut.

The woods—powdered, iced, and glittering—possessed an unearthly beauty that I tried to ignore as I stepped quickly along the path. I kept my eyes firmly focused on the ground.

The snow reflected the light from the house well before I came upon it. In spite of my resolve to not look, to just walk on by, I turned my head.

The front door was open. The light inside the house shone brighter than yesterday and the warmth radiating from within seemed stronger. What's more, the furniture beyond the front door

had changed in the past twenty-four hours. It looked less rundown, better kept. The table was similar to the one in my own kitchen and several chairs now kept sentry around it. Both the mirror on the wall and the bed in the corner appeared bigger, more ornate.

There were a number of smells now riding on the currents of warm air—oatmeal, coffee, bacon and eggs. And I heard a sound, faint and indistinct, from within the house—a sizzling, scraping sound, like food being fried and flipped in a pan. I thought of Muriel cooking my breakfast.

From where I stood on the footpath, the front door offered a very narrow view of the house's interior. I thought if I were only a little closer I could get a better look inside. I could peek around the door to the right and the left. I could see who was in there, who was cooking at that unseen stove.

I approached the front door. I noticed the circular clearing was free of snow. Why is that, I wondered. The heat, that's why. It was so warm within the clearing. I knew it would be even warmer in the house. Maybe I'd be able to take the chill off my bones inside. Maybe I could even get something to eat. Something warm. Something tasty. Something . . .

I stepped on something. Something soft. I recoiled and glanced down. It was a red toboggan cap.

The one I'd given to Crazy Joe.

Lying not far from the cap, unfurled like a shed snakeskin, was the scarf I'd given him. And beyond that, a brown jacket, frayed and mended just like the one Joe wore. And just before the front door, a pair of old work boots lay discarded on their sides.

I stumbled back to the footpath. Those were Joe's clothes scattered all over the clearing. Like he'd pulled them off and thrown them aside. Just doffed them like a summertime bather about to take a dip. Ripped his clothes off in freezing weather before entering that house, that house that should be abandoned but isn't.

I ran out of the woods. Behind me a door slammed and something sighed in frustration. My breath steamed from my mouth like exhaust from an old engine. On Dahlia Street I calmed down enough to throw the last of my papers. Duty first. And then I called the police from a phone booth.

I had to make it sound plausible. I didn't want them to think I was a crank or a nut case. I identified myself, told them I was a newspaper carrier, and said I thought someone was in the deserted house in Hobb's Woods. Maybe a squatter. I said I saw lights on

and clothing strewn about. I didn't say anything about the heat or the open door or about Crazy Joe.

Back home, I chased my breakfast of bran flakes with a shot of whisky.

And then I pulled Muriel's Bible off the shelf. I don't know why—to find some words of encouragement or comfort maybe, or maybe just to hold something that Muriel once held, to feel a little closer to her.

I'm not a very religious man. My people were rock-ribbed Protestants, but Muriel was a Catholic, so I converted when we married. We raised the kids Catholic, but I never much took to it; couldn't see the use of all that ritual. That was always Muriel's big disappointment with me. I guess I haven't been to church since her funeral.

I opened the Bible at random to Ecclesiasticus, one of the books not in the King James version. A phrase jumped out at me: "Many are the traps of the crafty."

It reminded me of something I read about the war in Afghanistan, about booby traps the Soviet soldiers left in the hills and villages, bombs made to look like toys so children would pick them up.

After sunup I called the police again to ask about the results of my report. I spoke to a pleasant sergeant who explained that yes, the responding officers had found some clothes in front of the house, but no, the house showed no signs of habitation or entry. In fact, the door and windows were boarded up. But thank you anyway for your concern. "We depend on alert citizens like yourself, sir," he said.

It was easy to resist another daylight visit to Hobb's Woods. Instead, I drove to my son Francis's house. As I've said, Francis is supposed to be keeping an eye on me, so I occasionally pay him a visit so he can fulfill his filial duty.

Francis might charitably be called the family eccentric. He works out of his home as some kind of computer consultant and his place is littered with all kinds of electronics, but his real love is botany. He has an attached greenhouse that he keeps hot and steamy where he raises tropical plants, and a basement that he keeps dark and damp where he raises fungi and mushrooms. Two different circles of hell is how I categorize them.

"Dad! What a surprise. C'mon in. Join me for lunch."

"That depends, Francis. What are you serving?"

"Uh, well, hummus and alfalfa sprouts on pita bread, but I think I can throw together a can of soup and a ham on rye for you, Dad."

He also served some home-brewed beer that wasn't half bad. He's clever, Francis is. He just lacks common sense.

We didn't talk much—I find it hard to talk about more than generalities with my adult children—but Francis sensed something was troubling me.

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"I'm an old man, son. 'Twilight and evening bell, And after that the dark!'"

"Still reading Tennyson, I see. You always were an autodidact, Dad."

"Don't call me dirty names, Francis."

"Go on, you old faker. You can't fool me with any of that innocent yokel stuff. You're a well-read man. A self-educated man. You and Mom raised all of us to have a great respect for education."

"Now get up and come with me, Dad. I've got some new specimens in the greenhouse to show you. Don't roll your eyes like that. This will take your mind off your melancholia."

Francis was wrong. All those fleshy orchids dripping in the steam of his greenhouse just reminded me of that soft, mouldering pile in the woods. I declined a similar tour of the basement. The correspondences of lichen to Hobb's Woods would be even stronger there. Even the phosphorescence of some of the moss would be too similar to that light in the house.

"Look, Dad. Over here." Francis indicated a small potted plant consisting of half a dozen green stems, each topped with a spike-lipped, hinged leaf colored red on the inside. "Ever see one of these?"

"Only in horror movies."

"Ah, so you recognize it," Francis said. "*Dionaea muscipula*. The Venus flytrap."

"Nasty-looking thing." The red leaf-traps made me think of the hell's mouth in medieval mystery plays.

"It's all a part of nature," Francis said. "The plant appears to offer the fly what it wants—a little nectar, a little nourishment, some bright color—but it's really a trap. It really is like a horror movie."

The cold and the snow kept the Halloween trick-or-treaters to a minimum that evening. Only two groups of costumed kids rang my bell. I snacked on the leftover candy before turning in, and

maybe it was the unaccustomed sweets that kept me awake most of the night. When sleep came, it was disturbed by chaotic dreams, dreams of mushrooms shaped like Venus flytraps. I dreamt of Muriel standing in Francis's greenhouse and of Crazy Joe running, not away from some unknown peril but toward it, tearing his clothes off as he ran. I dreamt of meteors and of a witch's house made of gingerbread and of bombs disguised as toys.

I fumbled the papers a good deal the next morning as I rolled them in the kitchen. A late-breaking news item was boxed on the *Herald-Trumpet's* front page, two or three paragraphs about a pair of kids who didn't return from trick-or-treating last night. At deadline time a search party had been organized.

The kids lived in my neighborhood.

All along my route I noticed lights on in houses and small groups of men and women coming and going. Conversations carried across the chilled air in staccato phrases and hushed whispers. Dogs barked, and cars skidded on the ice. Police cars were parked near Hobb's Woods, and voices resounded among the trees. Never in all my years of paper-throwing had I seen such life in the neighborhood at that hour.

I wasn't surprised when I came to the house in the clearing and found it as it was in daylight—closed, dark, and dead. Just an innocent, deserted house, boarded up and neglected.

The house had survival instincts, you see. It couldn't show its true nature, no, not with the woods full of tramping, shouting search parties. It couldn't work on a crowd, couldn't risk the exposure. It only preyed on the helpless and the lonely—children and derelicts and old men—like a carnivore attracted by the thrashing of the sick and the wounded.

A piece of cloth lay on the ground in the fairy ring around the house. Part of a child's Halloween costume.

My customers on Dahlia Street got their papers a little late that morning.

I hung around the house after I had shouted for the attention of the search parties. I watched as the cops and the volunteers converged from all directions into the clearing; watched as they examined the costume and scanned the grounds; watched as they easily broke down the rotted door to the house; watched as they entered and played their lights through its interior; watched as they emerged, pronouncing the house empty and uninhabited for years; watched as the crowds began a systematic search of the woods,

fanning out from the clearing like beaters on an English hunt.

I hit the whisky bottle pretty heavily when I got home. I can't take the cold any more. My hands were as stiff as an arthritic's.

The cops came by later to interview me. After all, two mornings in a row I had reported discarded clothing in front of that house. I don't know, maybe they suspected me in the children's disappearance. I let 'em believe I was just an old guy with an eye for detail. A male Miss Marple.

I didn't tell them what I really knew about the house, didn't tell them what it really was. I didn't want them to lock me up as a lunatic, a whisky-swilling loner who might be a threat to himself or to others.

I spent the rest of the day thumbing through Muriel's books, books that had lain unopened for years. They were mostly religious books—devotionals, missals, lives of the saints.

I remembered it was All Saints Day. A Holy Day of Obligation for the Catholic Church. Muriel and I used to get the kids corralled and dressed up for Mass on such holy days, just like on Sundays. All Saints Day. All Hallows Day. A hollow day today. No one cares any more. Can there really be saints in a world where children are victimized by bombs and perverts and . . . powers of darkness?

Muriel's a saint. Of that I was certain. What would she do in this situation? What would she say to me? Oh, God, how I missed her.

I poured the rest of the whisky down the kitchen sink and set the empty bottle on the counter. Then I staggered to bed and another night of bad dreams.

For the first time in years I didn't wake up before my alarm clock went off. I'd forgotten how its bell sounded. It clattered like a tocsin.

On the way back from the pickup site I stopped at a twenty-four-hour gas station.

It was another bitter cold morning. The snow crackled beneath my boots. I walked my route slowly and carefully. I tossed my papers gingerly. I was carrying something extra along with the papers.

In Hobb's Woods the bright lights and warm air and delicious aromas emanating from the house assailed me long before I reached the clearing.

It knew I was coming. It was ready for me. Today it would not let me pass. I knew too much.



The low-lying branch that always grabbed me almost knocked the ice cold whisky bottle out of my numbed hand.

I stepped in front of the clearing feeling like a gladiator marching into the Colosseum. Or like a martyr about to face the lions.

The house was glowing like a palace lit up for a ball. The heat in which it basked made the structure waver and dance before my eyes. Music came from within, classical music. I recognized a piece of Offenbach that was one of Muriel's favorites. The smells were all a hodgepodge of breakfast and Christmas cookies and baby powder and champagne and a perfume Muriel used to wear when we first dated half a century ago, in the days when we used to . . .

"No, no, don't think about it!" I said aloud, snapping my mind back to the job ahead of me.

The door to the house was open. Of course it was open. It had been broken down yesterday.

Inside the house, in the lights that glowed like the aurora borealis, I saw the interior of my own house. I saw my kitchen and, beyond it, my living room, not as they are today but as they were years ago when we first moved into the house. I saw the old Hot-point refrigerator, the gas range stove, the white cabinets and gray table on the black and white linoleum floor of the kitchen. In the living room images of TV programs from the fifties flickered across the screen of a clunky TV/stereo console, programs Muriel and I used to watch together on quiet nights after putting the kids to bed. And all the while Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" reverberated from within.

Oh, yes. It had pulled out all the stops for me this morning. This morning it would snare me for sure.

I stepped into the fairy ring. I walked deliberately and steadily across the clearing toward the front door. I tightened my grip on the gasoline-filled whisky bottle in my right hand. With my left hand I retrieved the cigarette lighter from my pocket.

Helpless old man, am I? Doddering old fool? We'll see who's the stronger one here. We'll see who the survivor is, you devil-spawned, murdering pile of . . .

"Michael! What are you doing?"

That voice! I stopped on the spot.

"Don't be silly, Michael. Put that thing down and come here."

My hands trembled. The lighter slipped from my grip and fell to the ground.

That voice. I hadn't heard that voice in . . .

"Ten years, Michael. Ten years. I've missed you so. Come here, sweetheart."

Muriel.

"Come to my arms, Michael."

It was Muriel. Muriel standing in the doorway, smiling her shy sweet smile, her arms spread open for an embrace.

"Give me a hug, darling. It's been so long."

Muriel. Muriel greeting me again after all those years, all those lonely years.

"Don't keep me waiting, Michael. What's the matter with you? Come here."

Muriel stood before me, as solid and as real as I was, and yet she was more than one Muriel. She was Muriel at every stage of our lives: Muriel as a sixteen-year-old, the night I first met her at the Holland High School dance, dressed in peach taffeta and with a bow in her hair . . .

I let the bottle fall with a soft clunk to the ground.

. . . Muriel on our wedding night, beautiful and alluring; Muriel pregnant with our first child; Muriel dressed for church, with the children in tow . . .

I took my first step toward her.

. . . Muriel at the Wilders' New Year's Eve party in '63, the night she was giddy with champagne and we clutched each other at midnight like long-lost lovers . . .

I opened my arms and quickened my pace forward.

. . . Muriel on the beach, the year our adult children treated us to a surprise vacation in Hawaii; Muriel across the breakfast table, reading the paper and blowing on her coffee to cool it; Muriel old before her time, brave and dignified in spite of the pain of her final illness . . .

. . . Muriel as she lives in all of my memories.

"I love you, Michael. Please come to me, Michael. I love you."

I was almost there.

"Please hurry, Michael. Please."

I reached the door's threshold. One more step and Muriel would be in my arms again. I felt her breath, sweet as apples, on my face.

"That's right, Michael. Come to me. I love you. I want you."

I placed my foot on the doorstep.

"I want you."

A look of triumph flashed into her eyes. A look of cunning.

"No," I said. "No. You're not Muriel. Muriel's dead."

I fell back, away from her and the house.

"You're just my memories. Get away from me."

"No, Michael! Don't say that!" Her face collapsed in grief, as though I'd struck her. "Please, Michael!"

I tried to look away from her but couldn't. I continued to stumble backwards. My carrier bag kept me off-balance. My foot kicked against something hard and round.

The bottle. The gasoline.

"Michael," she pleaded. "Don't do this to me!"

I dropped down into a crouch and picked up the bottle. I swept my hand across the ground, feeling for the lighter.

"Michael, no!" she sobbed.

I found the lighter and snatched it up.

"I beg you, Michael, please!" She was crying.

I dragged myself upright under the weight of the carrier bag. I brought the bottle and lighter together in front of me. I held the lighter under the fuse of rags stuffed into the bottleneck. I clicked the lighter.

It didn't work.

"Michael! I love you!" she screamed.

I clicked the lighter again.

It sparked, but it didn't take.

"Michael! Don't!"

I clicked the lighter a third time. A yellow flame shot up from it. It caught onto the rag. The rag burst into flames.

"Michael!"

"Shut up!" I screamed. "You're not Muriel!" I lifted the bottle behind me. "You're not! You're not!"

My throwing arm was still good after all.

I hurled the flaming bottle at the figure in the doorway. The figure dissolved as the bottle arced through it. I heard glass smashing on the floor of the house, followed by a *phoomph* and a flash of light.

I turned and ran, ran like I was a kid again. The flames threw my shadow ahead of me, while behind me the house whistled and sighed and screamed as it died.

I cried all the way down Dahlia Street.

I went to church later that morning. It was All Souls Day. After Mass I lit three candles and said a prayer for three lost souls.

I didn't need to say a prayer for Muriel. I know she's in a better place and that I'll be joining her someday.

Until that final reunion there's no need for me to dwell in the past any more, because "the tender grace of a day that is dead will never come back to me."

There's only the future to think about.

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# The Case

## by Charles Ardai

**T**he five o'clock news offered several headline stories. None of them was about an airplane explosion above the runway at JFK. This made Leland Somers, who was watching the news from a hotel room in Chicago, nervous.

If the plane had blown up, as it had been supposed to, the blazing wreckage would have been featured at the top of the hour. Instead, the lead story had been something about prime lending rates and the Federal Reserve. News teams love fiery footage, Leland knew, and do everything short of setting their own explosions to get it. There was no way they could pass up a story as big as this. Unless there wasn't any story.

No news was bad news.

Leland rode the elevator down to the hotel's underground parking garage, then took his Volvo to the freeway. The nearest diner was a mile away, and when he reached it, it turned out not to have a phone. So Leland drove on. Five minutes later he pulled in at a Texaco station with a

phone booth in the back. He dug a handful of change out of his pocket and sent the attendant away to pump a tankful of gas. Leland laid his quarters and dimes out on the metal ledge next to the phone and started making calls.

Yes, the information desk said, flight 717A took off safely from O'Hare. Delayed by forty minutes, but that was to be expected with the weather. The flight should have arrived in New York City at four thirty. Would Leland like for her to check?

Leland hung up, then dialed New York.

Yes, flight 717A had arrived safely. Forty-five minutes behind schedule, but—

Leland hung up, dialed Los Angeles.

No, the luggage checked on flight 717A had made it all the way to New York—except for those pieces that had been taken off at the stopover in Chicago. Why? Was Leland missing a bag?

Leland hung up, swept the remaining change into his palm, and dropped it in his

pocket. Was Leland missing a bag? He certainly was, but he could hardly ask for it.

*What did it contain, sir?*

*Oh, this and that: some shorts, some souvenirs, five feet of firecotton wadding, a sensitively calibrated igniter, and enough C-32 plastic explosive to scatter pieces of your plane from Hoboken to Beijing.*

*Oh, that bag. Yes, we found it. We're holding it for you at the courtesy desk.*

Leland paid for the gas and a change of oil he hadn't needed or wanted or requested. Three minutes of doubling the speed limit brought him back to his hotel room. He switched on the news again.

Another coup attempt in the Philippines, housing starts on the decline, a shootout between rival gangs outside a downtown packing plant—no airplane explosion, no panels of airline toadies insisting that flying is still the safest way to travel, not even a small item about a suspicious package at JFK being intercepted, opened, defused, and investigated. That would have explained the failure, at least.

Leland tried to figure out what could have gone wrong. Maybe a malfunction in the activation mechanism, he thought. It was attuned to rapid drops in altitude near the

ground: the first such drop—the stopover landing in Chicago—primed the explosive, while the second—the landing at JFK—ignited it. Or should have. This was all controlled by a tiny microprocessor, and Leland was the first to admit that microprocessors were as unreliable as they were indispensable. Leland had tested the system, of course, but that didn't rule out the possibility of a last-minute breakdown. Wires might have jiggled loose. Yes, that made the most sense.

But even this did not explain why the bomb hadn't been found after the flight had landed at JFK. Airline security would have opened any unclaimed bags by now—

Of course, Leland realized. They had found it. They simply hadn't released this information to the public. Nor would they. You can't cover up an explosion, but a bomb that did not go off is another story. Leland could imagine the higher-ups telling the security team to keep quiet: chalk it up to good luck, men, and shut up. We don't want to frighten away ticket buyers.

Or, hell, maybe the bag *had* gotten lost, had ended up on a plane to Miami or Jacksonville or Guam. *And* the bomb had malfunctioned. Or maybe the mechanism had worked and

there was something wrong with the explosive itself—

Never mind, Leland told himself. What difference does it make why you failed? The point is that you did. The point is that flight 717A ended up in one piece instead of a million bits of scrap.

Leland knew he had two choices. He could go to Murami Al-Fasad and tell him what had happened, either the truth or a more self-flattering lie; Leland could ask for another chance to earn his fee, he could offer a freebie on top of that, he could even return the hundred thousand dollars Al-Fasad had deposited under his name in a Zurich bank account. Or he could run across the border into Ontario and hide out in the safehouse Thor Szkolar had set up with situations exactly like this in mind.

Leland weighed the alternatives carefully. Though some members of the Jihad were legendary for their brutality, Al-Fasad himself was a civilized man. He had been educated in the West, after all, and surely he would listen to reason—surely he would not forget Leland's past record of success after success—surely, Leland thought, he would be sympathetic.

Al-Fasad was only a telephone call away. Leland stared

at the phone by the bed for a good ten minutes.

Then he started to pack.

Raymond Conally stood by the baggage conveyor and watched as a tide of baggage flowed before him. Suitcases and bags of all descriptions rolled by on a great oval track. Unseen hands fed new bags in from the other side of a curtain of clear plastic strips that hung in front of a hole in the far wall. Tired travelers who spied their luggage climbed all over the conveyor belt and each other to get to it. Some bags were snatched right away; others went around and around, their owners evidently having forgotten them entirely. Raymond watched the same bulging golf bag circle into view five times before he stopped counting.

He should never have checked the case, he decided. It was too valuable; it was too important that the case arrive safely. But Raymond Conally was a man easily cowed, and when three stewardesses had insisted that his metal briefcase would not fit either in the overhead compartment or under the seat in front of him, he had agreed, against his better judgment, to check it. This is what he got for taking a small charter flight. They always



gave you a 757, with seats barely large enough for a child—Raymond was not a thin man—and no room at all for your carry-ons.

It didn't help, either, that Raymond was, by nature, a trusting soul. The fact was that, so far, no airline had ever lost his luggage. The danger was certainly there, especially with a flight that continued on, as this one did, but Raymond somehow didn't feel it would touch him. Losing one's luggage was something that happened to comedians on their way to the *Tonight Show*, or to one's tour-addicted uncles and aunts, not to a businessman on a business trip who couldn't afford to lose a briefcase packed with choice black pearls.

Raymond crossed his sweaty fingers and waited. Would it come? What would he do if it didn't?

It took three more cycles of the conveyor belt, during which time Raymond paced, his hands clasped tightly against each other, his stomach shriveling each time a new bag was added that wasn't his. But eventually, miraculously, when Raymond had begun to feel that surely no more bags remained to be unloaded, it came. The weathered, boxy, grey case appeared behind the plastic strips, then burst through—right in front of

the overstuffed golf bag coming around once more. Yes, here were his pearls, safely in his hands again. As the case rolled around the curve, Raymond pulled it off the belt.

It wasn't very heavy, but Raymond was tired and that made it feel heavier than he remembered. No matter. He'd have it home soon enough, then he'd carry it to his office, and then it would be out of his hands once and for all.

Raymond shifted his suit bag to a more comfortable position on his shoulder, hefted the metal case bravely, and made his way through the crowd to O'Hare's nearest exit.

Some time after Raymond left, another weathered, boxy metal case emerged from behind the plastic strips and made its neglected way along the conveyor. It looked almost identical to the case Raymond had carried away, the only notable difference being that this one had a small tag hanging off the handle with Raymond Conally's name and business address spelled out on it in block letters.

The case circled a couple of dozen times and, when nobody claimed it, was returned (along with the golf bag and several other articles of luggage) to the roomy underbelly of flight 717A to New York.

Leland settled into the passenger seat of Szkolar's car and fastened the shoulder strap over his chest. Candy wrappers and sections of an old newspaper littered the footwell under the glove compartment. Leland kicked them to one side and tried to make himself comfortable. The seatbelt pinched at his waist and pressed his shoulder holster into his side. He shifted a little to find a better position.

Szkolar, meanwhile, pulled the car into traffic.

"It's a lucky thing you called when you did. Five minutes later and I'd have been gone. I'm making a pickup."

Leland nodded. "I'm just one lucky son of a bitch."

"You are." Szkolar talked without shifting his eyes from the road. His huge hands held the steering wheel in an expert grip, and within minutes he had outpaced every other car on the road.

"Yeah, lucky as hell. Lucky there's one guy in this city who won't pop me and then deliver my corpse to Murami to see what kind of reward he'll offer."

"Who's that?"

"You, who do you think?"

"Are you so sure I won't?"

"Don't joke about that," Leland said.

"Sorry."

"It's not funny."

"Fine."

"A man hires me to blow up a plane for him, he pays me a lot of money, and I do nothing. Okay?"

"Because as far as he knows, I did nothing. He doesn't know I planted a bomb that didn't work. All he knows is that the plane didn't blow up and that the four men he wanted to blow up with it are alive and well. I'm a dead man."

"What I don't understand is, why didn't you just use a timer?"

"A timer?" Leland threw up his hands. "For God's sake. How could I have used a timer? Who knows when these planes will land? There was a forty-five minute delay. Could I have predicted that? It might have been a twenty minute delay. The plane could have been on time. It could have been two hours late. It could even have been ahead of schedule, and then I'd have blown it up after everyone had gotten off. There's no way I could have used a timer."

"Okay, calm down," Szkolar said. "So what was it that you did use?"

"I told you, a C-32 Bock-Martin."

"Yeah, you told me a C-32 Bock-Martin. You want to tell

me what that is?"

"I'll make it real simple," Leland said. He darted a glance in the rear view mirror. As far as he could tell, they weren't being followed. Yet. "C-32 is the explosive. That you know, right? It's the same stuff you use on safes. Bock-Martin is the detonator. The detonator responds to drops in altitude. You put it on a plane. The plane goes up, you're fine. Turbulence—no problem. But the plane comes down for its final descent and—boom. It ignites the C-32."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know," Leland said. "I honestly don't know."

"That bomb's out there somewhere. You realize that, don't you?"

Leland shook his head. "I'm sure the cops have it and are dusting it for prints as we speak."

"Maybe," Szkolar said. "Maybe not."

**T**he case did feel heavier than he remembered.

Was it just that he was tired? Or could someone have tampered with it? Raymond lifted it up to take a closer look, but just at that moment the last person in line in front of him got into a cab and it was his turn.

A skycap flagged down a taxi

that had just discharged a family of four at the boarding area. Raymond got in and gave the driver his address.

"You just get back," the cabbie asked, "or are you visiting?"

"No," Raymond said, "I live here." This would have been the right answer even if it hadn't been true—Raymond knew the cabbie was trying to see if he could take him for a ride, running up the meter by driving in circles. "I've lived here all my life."

"Good for you," the cabbie said, not sounding particularly pleased about it.

Raymond lifted the case to his lap, laid it down flat on his knees, and rested his hands on it. It didn't look tampered with—on the outside. He would have liked to look inside, but he didn't have the key. Perhaps it was just as well. He was carrying some of the merchandise loose, and the back seat of a speeding cab would have been the wrong place to open a case full of loose pearls.

Looking at the case more closely, Raymond noticed for the first time that his name tag was missing from the handle. He responded the way a soldier on the front might to finding a pair of bullet holes in his helmet: he felt a chill, as though he had just received a warning from a higher power. He re-

membered how long he'd had to wait at the baggage conveyor. No, in the end he hadn't lost the case, but he had come closer than he had realized. The baggage handlers had (accidentally?) torn off the only identification anywhere on the case. If Raymond hadn't picked it off the conveyor, the case would have been gone for good.

He felt fortunate and chastened.

And here he'd been worrying about whether the case had been tampered with. If it had been, he told himself, it would be lighter, not heavier. No, everything was exactly as it should have been. He patted the case affectionately as the cab raced, bumped, and swayed through the streets of Chicago.

“Suppose someone picked up your bag at the stop-over,” Szkolar said.

“Why would someone do that?” Leland asked.

“You want to know how often I’ve done it?”

“And you’ve done it because . . .”

“It’s an easy score. No one stops you at an airport. You can walk off with any bag you want. Some people,” Szkolar said in a tone rich with scorn,

“even do it as an honest mistake.”

There was silence in the car as they sped toward the Dolbinder Marina.

“So you’re saying the bomb could still be active, somewhere in the city.”

“I’m saying it’s possible.”

“And if it is, it could go off at any rapid descent. If someone dropped the damn thing down a flight of stairs—”

“Mm-hm.”

Leland relaxed in his seat. “Man, I hope you’re right.”

“You hope I’m right?”

“Sure. That would mean that the evidence is far away from the airport, not in the hands of the cops, and about to blow itself up.”

“Yes,” Szkolar said, “but it’s going to blow some innocent people up along with it.”

“Better them than me,” Leland said.

Szkolar didn’t say anything.

The doorman, whose name was also Ray, helped Raymond out of the cab and to the elevator. He carried Raymond’s suit bag. Raymond carried the case.

The forty story climb to Raymond’s floor took only a few seconds, and when the elevator stopped, Raymond suffered the uncomfortable lurch he felt ev-

ery time he rode it. It was the feeling of his inner organs continuing upwards for a second after he and the elevator car had come to a halt. The only feeling that was worse was the feeling of being pressed to the floor of the elevator after a forty story descent to the lobby. Still, Raymond thought, a fast elevator was better than a slow one.

He carried the case and his suit bag into his apartment, spent half an hour hanging his suits up, showering, and changing, and then picked up the case and left again. Raymond would have liked to fall into bed, to sleep out the kinks in his knees and shoulders, but Becker was probably already wondering what had happened to him. It wasn't late enough in the afternoon that Raymond could justify putting off his trip to the office until the next morning. So he woke himself up with a quick glass of soda water, locked the door behind him, and called the elevator.

The indicator indicated that both cars were on the first floor. While he waited, Raymond put the case down and rested it against his leg.

He still thought it felt heavy. No matter.

After a few seconds, one elevator started to move; then the other started chasing the first in a race for Raymond. Ray-

mond picked up the case and approached the doors.

The first elevator slid open. A little boy ran out and down the hall. He was an eight-year-old given to idiotic pranks and loud midnight tantrums that had occasionally made Raymond consider moving to another floor. Raymond looked inside the elevator to see if the boy's mother was there, but she wasn't. Typical, letting the little monster run around on his own.

He stepped into the elevator. But just as he did, the second car arrived. Raymond heard its door shoot open invitingly. For an instant, while his car's door remained open, he considered switching cars to the one untainted by the little boy's presence . . . but there was no real reason for him to do so, and he didn't. Raymond chided himself for being so uncharitable. He put the case down and loosened his tie.

The door closed.

The elevator started moving down.

Raymond steeled himself for the sudden assault of gravity he knew was coming.

But after dropping for a second, the elevator slowed to a halt at the thirty-eighth floor.

The door opened.

A mother with two kids in tow and a third nestled heavily

in the crook of her elbow steered her brood onto the elevator. With a momentarily free hand she pressed the button for the lobby.

The elevator doors closed.

Raymond looked at his watch.

The motor three floors above their heads hummed into operation, and again the car started its descent.

One of the kids—a girl with big eyes and a red, runny nose—walked over to the case and stared at it. She's going to touch it, Raymond told himself. She's going to ask me what's in it. So he shifted the case to between his legs and clamped it tightly with his ankles. The girl ran back to her mother's side. One of her sisters started coughing, and hearing this, the baby started to cry.

The panel above the door ticked off the floors as they dropped past them: thirty-seven, thirty-six—

Then, abruptly, the elevator came to a halt again. The door opened.

There was no one there.

After a moment, Raymond jabbed the "Close Door" button.

The door closed. The elevator started.

Then stopped, at thirty-five.

Then at thirty-four.

And at thirty-three.

"Mommy," the red-nosed girl

whined, "what's happening?"

"Someone who was in here before us must have pushed all the buttons," the mother explained.

"Why?" The girl's voice set Raymond's teeth on edge.

"Someone thought it was a fun game, I guess," the mother said.

"But why?"

"I don't know, honey."

Meanwhile, they had stopped at thirty-two, thirty-one, thirty, twenty-nine, and twenty-eight.

Someone, Raymond said to himself. That little brat—another floor isn't good enough. I need to move to another building. He cursed himself silently: I *knew* I should have taken the other elevator.

Raymond tapped the case with the side of his foot as the elevator slowly inched its way to the ground floor.

**L**eland had the door open before Szkolar even killed the engine. He was out and darting glances around the parking lot while Szkolar was still pulling the key from the ignition.

"Don't be so impatient." Szkolar went around to the trunk, opened it, and started rummaging through its contents.

"I'm not impatient," Leland said. "I'm scared."

Szkolar pulled a satchel and a flare gun from the trunk. "Big boy like you shouldn't be scared." He slammed the trunk shut.

"You don't know what the Jihad does to big boys like me."

"I can guess."

"If you can guess, why aren't you moving faster?"

"Listen," Szkolar said. "I'm doing you a favor, letting you stay at my place. Don't abuse my hospitality."

"All I'm saying is, could we please get there a little faster?"

"You give me three million dollars, we can leave right away. Otherwise, I'm going to make my pickup the way I planned. Understand?"

Leland nodded. He walked with Szkolar to the end of the pier, where a grimy blue boat with *Thor's Hammer* stenciled on the side was tied up. Szkolar threw the satchel and the flare gun onto the deck, then pulled himself up on an iron rung welded to the side. Leland climbed up after him.

"What is it that we're picking up, anyway?" Leland asked.

"We aren't picking anything up. I am picking something up, and what I am picking up is none of your business, my friend. With everything hanging over you right now, the last thing you need is to be implicated in a robbery, too."

"What did you—"

"Just shut up and unpack the bag," Szkolar said. "You'll see soon enough."

*Thor's Hammer* pulled out into the open bay, churning up the water behind it.

Raymond carried the case to his office by foot, wishing all the way that it didn't look so conspicuous. A metal valise in a city more accustomed to sleek leather attaché cases was sure to catch the eye of every street hustler and mugger he passed. In fact, Raymond did see a few eyes turn his way; each time this happened, he put on the most determined expression he could and switched the case to his other hand.

Can they guess what's inside? he wondered. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he rushed along empty midafternoon streets and past shadowed doorways. Even if they can't, Raymond told himself, they can probably figure out that it's something valuable.

He held the case close to his side, in a grip so tight that his fingers started to ache. As his building came into sight, he started to walk faster, and when he was only ten yards away, he threw his embarrassment aside and broke into a full-fledged run. Raymond



had the sudden impression that there was someone behind him. Part of his mind knew that this was just foolish paranoia, but the rest of his mind didn't; he ran, gulping down ragged breaths, until he had passed through the revolving door and into the lobby.

He put the case down and looked back the way he had come. There had been no one behind him. There was no one anywhere on the street. Good. Shame started to creep into his mind, but he forced it back. So I ran, he said to himself as he straightened his hair and his tie. So I'm a coward. So what? No one saw me. And there *could* have been someone following me. You can never be too careful. He reached down to pick up the case.

It wasn't there.

Then something hard and heavy connected with the back of Raymond's head, and just before he lost consciousness, he felt, mixed in with feelings of terror and rage, a strong sense of vindication.

Raymond came to behind one of the Oriental folding screens that decorated the lobby—where, he realized, the thug who hit him must have been hiding when he entered. He felt the large, soft spot on the back of his head and winced.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and spent a few minutes trying to focus on his watch face. It seemed that he had been unconscious for almost three hours. Not exactly the rest he had wanted. But what could he do?

He made his way to the elevator, and while he waited for it to arrive, he prepared himself for the scene he was about to face. He'd be fired, for sure. He had just lost more than two million dollars' worth of pearls. There was no way around it, no excuse that could make up for it.

Raymond walked slowly to the door of Becker International, Ltd., and punched the doorbell only after a moment of agonized hesitation. When he walked in, Becker was there, meaty hands on his ample hips, hot in an argument with Orin Myer, his vice president. They both turned to look at Raymond as he staggered in.

"I'm sorry," Raymond mumbled. He walked to the couch by the receptionist's desk and fell onto it, holding his head in his hands.

Becker came over to him, loomed above him. "Ray," he said, "you realize that this is unacceptable."

Ray nodded.

"It can never happen again."

Again? "No, sir, of course not . . ."

"We got a call from airport security in New York. They found your case when no one claimed it. Fortunately, it had our address on it. I sent Kyle Baker to pick it up."

"I—I—"

Becker put a hand up. "Don't say anything. I don't want an apology. I don't even want an explanation. Just understand that this is your one and only warning." Becker turned and walked into his office.

Orin squatted next to Raymond. "You don't know how lucky you are. We were afraid the merchandise had been stolen. If you had let someone steal the line, I don't know what Becker would have done."

"But someone *did*—"

Orin had already gotten up and was on his way out of the room. Raymond didn't bother finishing his sentence.

The receptionist leaned over her station and looked down at Raymond. His hair was matted with dried blood and his suit looked as if it had been dragged along a dusty floor.

"What the hell happened to you?" she said.

Raymond shrugged.

**L**eland stood at the railing, the loaded flare gun in his hand. The sun had almost completely set; a thin red sliver of light still

shone between the bottom of the bridge and the water.

The boat slowed and then stopped, rising and falling with the waves. Szkolar came to Leland's side and squinted up toward the bridge. Lights along the pedestrian walkway at the bridge's edge showed that the bridge was empty.

"Now what?"

"Now we wait," Szkolar said. He looked at the faint green figures on his watch. "It shouldn't be long. My man heisted the stuff this afternoon."

"Can't you tell me what it is now?"

"Pearls. Japanese black pearls."

"That's worth three million dollars?"

"You'd better believe it."

A horn honked three times from the bridge. Then a car door slammed.

"That's him," Szkolar said. "Shoot the flare."

Leland aimed the gun straight up and fired. A silent flare tore upwards, exploding in the night sky. Szkolar scanned the railing of the bridge until first a pair of hands, then a face, appeared.

"There he is," Szkolar said, pointing. He motioned Leland back from the railing. "He's going to throw the case down to us on a rope."

The man on the bridge lifted the case up to and over the edge of the bridge. A rope was tied to its handle. Leland stared at it. Recognition was slow to creep into his face.

"Funny," he said, "that looks like . . ." Then he blanched.

"Looks like what?" Szkolar said.

Leland wasn't listening. He had his hands cupped at his mouth and he was shouting, "No! Don't drop it! *Don't drop it!*"

But the case was already falling.

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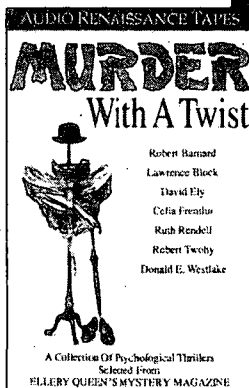
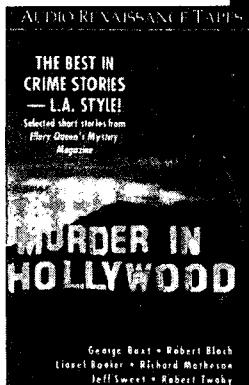
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# ASCOM City

by Martin Limón

**T**he breath of hungover GI's steamed the windows of the rickety army bus as it swerved around pot-holes on the road to ASCOM City. Things couldn't have been better. Except that we weren't going there to run the village, we were going there to look at a corpse.

My name is George Sueño, Criminal Investigation Division, 8th Army Detachment, Seoul, Korea. When my partner Ernie Bascom and I got the assignment from the first sergeant, we thought it was harassment.

"GI's turn up dead in business girls' hooches all the time," Ernie said. "Carbon monoxide poisoning. Routine."

"Maybe so," the first sergeant said. "But this time the girl wasn't lying next to him. She cleaned out her room, and she's gone."

Ernie shrugged. "She probably got scared. The Korean National Police will find her."

"Or you will." The first sergeant looked at his watch. "A bus leaves for the Army Support Command every other

hour. I expect you two guys to be on the next one."

Ernie started to say something, but I slapped him on the elbow. He looked at me, I jerked my head towards the door, and we got up and walked out. We didn't speak until we were half-way down the hallway.

"The team from the inspector general is going to be here tomorrow," Ernie said. "That's probably why he wants us out of the way."

"Maybe. Or maybe his cop's sense of propriety is offended when a GI wakes up in the morning dead."

"Yeah. Maybe." Ernie slammed through the big double doors of the red brick C.I.D. building. "At least it'll give us a chance to run the ville in ASCOM City."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe."

We flashed our identification to the desk sergeant at the ASCOM MP station.

"Lieutenant Crane has been waiting for you," he said. "Straight down the hallway. Third room on the left."

Lieutenant Crane was a gan-



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gly man in his early twenties with fatigue pants covering the length of his stilt-like legs. When we walked in, he looked up from a scattering of paperwork and ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't know why they sent you down here. The KNP's are still looking for the girl, but other than that it's nothing more than a carbon monoxide poisoning."

Ernie let me do the talking. He usually did when we talked to officers.

"Let's go see the hooch anyway, lieutenant. You never know."

His face went through suspicious contortions, but then he came to the conclusion that since we were from 8th Army headquarters, and since we were on an official investigation, it would be best to cooperate. In our business those thought processes are familiar.

He strapped on his .45, perched his shiny MP helmet liner atop his head, and ambled out into the hallway. As we went through a doorway, the top of his narrow shoulders hunched forward and stayed that way. "I'll be in the ville," he told the desk sergeant, "on the VonEric case. Send a patrol for me if you need me."

The desk sergeant nodded.

At the gate, armed MP's

carded Ernie and me but just saluted the lieutenant and let him by.

The ville started right across the street: Lee's Tailor Shop, the Brass Emporium, Chosun Souvenirs. Farther down the road came a few nightclubs: the Hideaway, the Lotus Blossom, the UN Club. And then the alleys. Narrow. Mud-filled. With more nightclubs, more neon, and more rock and roll blaring out of darkened doorways. Little eateries were interspersed throughout the maze, advertising fried chicken and yakimandu. Old women carried bundles of laundry atop their heads. Young girls scurried back and forth from bathhouses, flat sandals slapping against the balls of their feet.

Ernie took a deep breath.

"Nice place they got here," he said.

We wound down another couple of alleys—Lieutenant Crane at the point—until he turned down an opening that was nothing more than a gap between cement block walls. As we passed through, I turned slightly sideways to keep the arms of my leather coat from getting scuffed. A quick jog to the left and then he pounded on a high wooden gate.

"Ajjima," Crane said. "*Honbyong!*"

I was impressed. He an-



nounced himself in a polite way as being a representative of the military police. And his pronunciation was good.

An old woman opened the gate and let us in.

The hooch was typical. A small dirt-floored courtyard surrounded by a tile-roofed building divided into four or five rooms. Without bothering to speak to the woman, Lieutenant Crane stepped up on the wooden porch in front of the nearest hooch and slid back the wood frame door.

"It was here," he said. "We found Specialist VonEric dead about 0700 this morning. This old lady called the Korean National Police, and they relayed the message to us."

I talked to the old woman. She was surprised at first that I spoke Korean, but she went on to explain that she had heard nothing with the possible exception of the front gate slamming some time before dawn. Of course she might've been dreaming it, she said. I liked the old woman. She had a fat oval face that broke into concentric circles when she smiled, which she often did. The smile disappeared when I asked her about the body.

It was late, the sun was already up, and she knew the GI who was staying in the first hooch should have been on his

way to work, but she had heard no noise. She called to the woman who lived there, her name was Yu Kyong-hui, and when there was no answer, she rapped on the rice-papered door and slid it open.

She couldn't smell the carbon monoxide, of course, because it's an odorless gas, but she saw the gray pallor on the GI's face and smelled the evidence of the loosening of his bowels. She opened all the windows and called the police, but it was too late.

Ernie wandered around the courtyard, restless. A few young Korean women were playing flower cards in their room and had slid back the door when we came in. Ernie winked at them. They giggled.

The old woman said she recognized the GI. He had lived with Miss Yu in the past but hadn't been around for over a month. Who had Miss Yu been seeing during that time? No one. She kept talking about an old boyfriend who would be coming back to Korea. The old woman didn't know who he was. She had never seen him, that had happened before Miss Yu ever moved here. The old woman also had no idea where Miss Yu had gone, and there had been no indication that she was planning to leave but, yes, most of her clothing had been

taken with her. It didn't look like she was planning on coming back. She'd left a deposit on the room, the old woman said, but it didn't cover the back rent she owed.

Ernie and I slipped off our shoes before we stepped into the hooch. A large western-style bed filled most of the room. There was a beat-up old hi-fi set, a few scattered jars of makeup, some loose scraps of clothing, and a jumble of naked coat hangers in the small plastic wardrobe.

"The KNP's have already searched the room," Lieutenant Crane said. "They're very thorough."

"I know that," I said.

Just for drill I lifted the mattress, and Ernie poked around behind the wardrobe.

After a little searching Ernie said, "This must have been where the gas came out."

There was a crack in the cement floor. Most Korean homes are heated by charcoal gas that is pushed through ducts beneath the floor. When the floor is covered with vinyl and a soft mat is laid down, it makes a comfortable place to sleep during the cold Korean winters.

Ernie lifted his fingers. They were dusted with powdered cement from the edges of the crack. "The hole opens directly into the gas duct," he said.

We stood up and straightened our clothes. On the way out I noticed something white and pointed peeking out of a crack in the wallpaper. It was flat against the wall, and I had a little trouble getting my fingernails under it to pull it out.

It was a wallet-sized photograph of a GI. His smiling face beamed out at the world over his neatly pressed dress green uniform. Blue infantry piping draped his arm.

The morgue was in the basement of a thick-walled cement building that was so heavily fortified it must have been an ammunition storage building at one time. I shivered when the white-smocked attendant slid the body out of the refrigerated cabinet.

"The remains of Specialist Four Rodney VonEric," Crane said. "Former stalwart employee of the ASCOM Repo Depot."

I compared the pasty gray face of the corpse to the bright suntanned face in the photograph. Not even close.

Lieutenant Crane decided he had pretty well wrapped up the case for us, so he left us and went back to his office. A small army compound is always a little nervous when somebody from 8th Army comes poking

around, but Crane figured that the case was so clearly an accident he'd be able to tell the ASCOM provost marshal that there was nothing to worry about from us.

Probably he was right.

After he left, we wandered around the compound. Neatly clipped patches of lawn had been bleached yellow by the cold breath of autumn. A few crinkled leaves hadn't given up for some reason and still clung stupidly to skeleton branches.

"Should we catch the last bus to Seoul?" Ernie said.

"I keep wondering why that girl disappeared."

"The KNP's will find her. That's not for us."

"Yeah."

We wandered past the facade of the post theater. A fantasy was playing, with the half-naked daughter of some movie star in the lead. Nothing I wanted to see.

"Anyway, let's check out the Repo Depot," I said. "Give us some more notes for our report. Then we can spend the night here in ASCOM City. Go back to work late tomorrow."

Ernie shrugged. "The ville looks pretty good, but I don't know."

"Don't worry," I said. "It looks even better at night."

What was commonly called

the Repo Depot was more properly known as the Army Support Command Replacement Detachment. After a GI lands at Kimpo Army Airfield, he is hustled through a maze of inoculations and customs procedures and then bused to the Repo Depot here at ASCOM. A day or two later, the unit he will be assigned to is decided upon.

This is a crucial moment in a GI's life. He could get assigned to the sunny beaches of Pusan in the south of the country, or he could be banished to freezing night patrols along the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea.

When he strode into the Replacement Detachment area, Ernie snorted.

"They kept me here for four days. Couldn't decide what to do with me."

"It's those lousy efficiency ratings you got," I said.

"Yeah. Sure. That's why they sent me to 8th Army headquarters."

"To keep an eye on you."

He shrugged. "Fuck up and move up."

A wall-sized map of Korea greeted us as we walked through the entranceway. The U.S. Army compounds scattered throughout the peninsula were marked in red, and a chubby hand pointed to Pu-

pyong over the stenciled message, "You are here." The map had been there during my first tour in Korea, and it had probably been there for years before that. A geographical anchor for disoriented troops.

There was a little traffic in and out of the Replacement Detachment. Unusual for a sleepy compound on a Sunday afternoon, but not so unusual if they just got a flight in full of replacements. We sought out the Charge of Quarters. The thin old crewcut man took us directly to Buck Sergeant Freddy R. Waitz.

He had just sent some men away from his desk and was rummaging through a short stack of paperwork, checking off blocks with a pencil. He looked up when we approached.

"Spec Four VonEric used to work for you?"

Waitz was not a tall man, about five seven or five eight, with a husky build and a flat, hooked-nose face that would have looked Indian if he hadn't been fair-skinned, blond, and blue-eyed. He spoke with an Alabama drawl. On a small compound like this, he didn't have to ask if we were C.I.D. He knew.

"That's right."

"Where's his desk?"

"There." He pointed past some filing cabinets and a sten-

cil machine on the other side of the room. "I was gonna have it cleaned out today, but we got a flight in."

The desk was standard army issue. Gray. Metal. Boxlike. There was an in and out box on top of it and a few manuals but no pictures of relatives. I riffled through the paperwork and then checked the drawers. Ernie wandered over to the water cooler and got interested in the pure spring refreshment from Mount Sorak.

It was the bottom 'right drawer where I found them. Stacks of neatly folded newspapers. The last few weeks' worth of the sports page of the *Pacific Stars & Stripes*. On each page penciled figures surrounded the pro football betting line.

Waitz looked down at me as I rummaged through them.

"He bet football?" I said.

Waitz shrugged. "I don't know."

I stood up and looked down at him.

"Come on, Waitz. Betting football is a petty offense. Not nearly as serious as getting yourself dead out in the ville. Now, who did he bet with?"

Waitz turned his face. The profile would have looked at home on the flip side of a buffalo nickel.

"He bet with Phil Austin. I don't know much about it, but

it was just innocent stuff. You know, to have a little money down on the games so he could look forward to the Tuesday issue of *Stripes*, so he could see who won."

"Who was his favorite team?"

"Huh?"

"Didn't he have a favorite team?"

"Not that I know of."

"Where was he from?"

"Somewhere up north. Indianapolis, I think."

"They don't even have a pro team there."

"Oh. Well, we don't have one in Birmingham, either."

Waitz reached in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He lit it with a match from a brightly colored box.

"Do you know the girl Von-Eric was with last night?"

"No. I've seen her around, but I never paid much attention. He's been moping around because they broke up a few weeks ago."

"Broke up? Did you see them together last night?"

"Not out in the ville. At the EM Club. I stopped in there to get something to eat, and I saw him all smiles, leaving with her."

"What time was that?"

"About ten."

"You eat late."

"Flight in last night."

Waitz fiddled with the

matchbox in his hand, and I saw the logo of the Olympos Hotel and Casino in Inchon.

"Do you go to the ville often?"

"I stay away from that dump. I got a section to run here. I don't want my men to see me out there."

"What do you do for recreation?"

"Work."

His blue eyes squinted at the smoke curling up from his nostrils.

"Where can I find this Phil Austin?"

"I don't know where he is today. He works at the printing plant, though."

I searched through the remaining drawers of the desk and found nothing except army issue office supplies and a few notes concerning the assignments of GI's to various bases throughout the country.

A group of sergeants came in for processing, and Waitz got busy handing out forms and explaining how to fill them out. When he wasn't looking, I slipped a couple of things into my pocket and then we left, without saying goodbye.

"Zilch," Ernie said. "It's time to hat up."

"Why are you in such a hurry to get back? Is the nurse waiting for you?"

"Yeah. You know how she is.

Freaks when I stay out overnight on a case."

"With good reason."

Ernie snorted.

"But you've never run the ville of ASCOM City," I said. "You don't want to miss your chance. And tomorrow we can sleep in late before we catch the bus back to Seoul. We'll check with this guy Austin at the printing plant, just to wrap things up, and tell the first sergeant we were working on the case."

"How many clubs you figure they got out here?"

"More than we can hit in one night."

A thin beam of greed emanated from Ernie's pale green eyes.

We stopped at the ASCOM NCO Club, had the pork cutlet special with a big bottle of chilled red wine, and then I.D.'d our way through the heavily fortified gate. After trotting through the traffic of the Main Supply Route, we strolled into the neon night of ASCOM City.

**T**he Pupyong Police Box, Western Area, was a small cement block building painted yellow with a winged flower over the entranceway. We showed our identification to the sergeant on duty and told him we were

here to investigate the death of Rodney VonEric from carbon monoxide asphyxiation.

He immediately knew which case we were talking about—GI's don't die every day in ASCOM City—but his English was very poor and he was relieved to find out that I could speak Korean.

"Have you found the girl yet?"

"No." He thumbed through a notebook in front of him. "The police in her hometown have been contacted. They talked to her mother, but she claims that they have not seen her for many months now."

"What is her hometown?"

"Pankyo. A little country village outside of Taejon."

"Was she registered here with you, as an entertainer, I mean?"

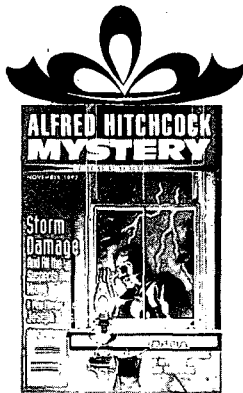
"Yes."

He took us over to a large booklet with the names of nightclubs stenciled neatly on top and dozens of small photographs pasted beneath. Blank female stares winked at us as he thumbed through the book.

"Here she is," he said. "She worked at the Blue Dragon Club, and her name is Yu Kyong-hui."

I thanked him, and we walked out of the police box. He didn't have an extra copy of the photograph, but even consider-

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YPWH-4



ing the poor quality of the black and white snapshot, I wasn't likely to forget that face.

No matter how many years I spent in the Orient I would never get used to the number of gorgeous women who were forced to work in dumps like ASCOM City.

We rolled through the alleys. Rock and roll blared from darkened nightclubs, brightly manicured fingers clutched at us as we passed. Finally we found the Blue Dragon. From the outside it appeared to be one of the larger clubs, and it sat in one of the most crowded and brightly lit alleys. I figured we were approximately in the center of the red-light district known as ASCOM City.

We pushed through the beaded curtain, and thirty sets of blinking eyelashes followed us as we stepped carefully through the multicolored darkness to the bar. The place was mostly empty, just a few GI's at tables in desultory conversation with a couple of the girls. An old woman approached and brought us a couple of cold beers, and then a pair of mini-skirted girls materialized out of the darkness. They got a little standoffish when I mentioned Miss Yu Kyong-hui, but they swore they hadn't seen her for two nights. "Two nights?"

"Yes," one of the girls said. "She wasn't here last night. And the night before that she went out early with a GI, but she never came back."

"Did Miss Yu have a boyfriend?"

"Yes. But she finished with him about a month ago."

"Why?"

The girl shrugged her slim bare shoulders. Ebony hair cascaded around them and glistened in the gyrating light.

"Maybe not enough money. I don't know."

"This GI who took her out night before last, do you know him?"

"No."

"What did he look like?"

She conferred with the other girl, they chatted, and soon some of the other girls had gathered around and were offering their opinions. Finally the girl I had been talking to turned back to me and said in English, "We don't know what he looked like. Just GI, that's all."

The old woman brought another couple of wets, and Ernie gave one of the girls some money and sent her out to buy some dried squid and peanuts. I found out that the girl I had been talking to was named Miss Kwon, she was from Taegu, and she had high hopes of becoming a secretary some

day. For the rest of the night we drank and feasted, and when curfew came, I put away all thought of going back to Seoul.

After pounding on a small wooden door for about five minutes I got Ernie up. It took him about thirty seconds to get his clothes on, and we promised the girls we'd be back and bundled out the door into the cold Korean morning.

Ernie looked up at the sky. "Oh, good," he said. "It's cloudy."

A sharp wind whipped particles of grit into my face.

"What time is it?"

Ernie checked his watch. "Ten thirty."

I groaned.

We showered at the post gymnasium and then got shaves at the PX barber shop. By then it was almost noon, so we went over to the NCO Club and had lunch. By the time we got to the 8th Army Printing Plant it was already past one o'clock.

"Maybe we ought to call the first sergeant," Ernie said.

"With no news? Let's wait a little longer."

The 8th Army Printing Plant was a huge, thick-walled building, so brightly whitewashed that it almost hurt my eyes.

The only thing I could figure was that the Japanese Imperial Army that had built this compound must have kept a lot of valuables on hand. The whole place was like a fortress.

We walked into the admin office and flashed our identification, and it wasn't long before we had the plant manager, an American civilian, buzzing around us.

"Corporal Austin is one of our most reliable employees," he said. "I can't imagine what could be wrong."

"Maybe nothing," I said. "We just want to talk to him."

Austin was at his printing press, ink smeared on his fingers and a folded newspaper covering his head.

He was almost as tall as me, but lanky, and muscles stood out on his arms, pulsating in almost as steady a rhythm as the machinery behind him. He stared at us with intelligent brown eyes.

"It's about your bookmaking operation," I said.

He said nothing.

"How much was Rodney Von-Eric into you for?"

He didn't move. The only change in his face was a little moisture that appeared in his eyes. Finally he made his decision. "Over fifteen hundred dollars," he said.

Ernie whistled.

"But I didn't kill him."

"Where were you Saturday night?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"I go hiking sometimes. Through the Korean countryside." He waved an inkstained hand. "It's very peaceful out there, once you get away from the city."

"Where did you stay?"

"In a grove of trees."

I stared at him.

"I take my rucksack and a few C rations. When it's cold enough, I take my sleeping bag."

"Was anybody with you?"

"No."

"Did anybody see you leave?"

"I doubt it. Most of the guys in the barracks were already out in the ville. You know how they are."

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

Apparently the civilian manager had taken it upon himself to call the MP station because just then he walked in with Lieutenant Crane at his side. Crane started snapping questions, and Austin told him the same story. Crane turned to me.

"Why didn't you notify me?" he said. "This case belongs under our jurisdiction."

Ernie piped up.

"You weren't doing nothing."

Crane glared at him for a sec-

ond and then turned back to Austin. He took a green walkie-talkie off his belt and fiddled with it until it beeped. Thirty seconds later, two MP's came into the printing plant at a brisk walk.

Crane looked at Austin. "You're under arrest. Clean off your hands and step over here against the wall."

He did as he was told, and soon the MP's had him trussed up and Crane got into feverish conversation with the plant manager.

We left. I was happy to be outside in the fresh air and away from the noise of the churning machinery.

Back at the Blue Dragon Club we sat at a table nursing a couple of wets, waiting for Miss Kwon and her girlfriends to come back from the bathhouse. When they came in, they were wearing only T-shirts and short pants and had towels wrapped around their hair, and their clean, fresh faces bubbled with laughter. When they saw us, they surrounded our table.

Miss Kwon said, "You come back."

"Sure," Ernie said. "We're not number ten GI's. We came back to say goodbye."

They went upstairs to change, we ordered another round of beers, and Miss Kwon

was the first one back.

I was fiddling in my wallet, looking for the first sergeant's number, thinking of calling him so we wouldn't get in too much trouble. The photograph of the GI I had found in Yu Kyong-hui's hooch fell out. Miss Kwon snatched it up.

"Where you get this?"

"From Miss Yu's hooch."

"She *taaksan* crazy about this GI. He's infantry, but he was stationed here before. He almost married Miss Yu, but he ran out of time to get an extension and had to go back to the States."

"Well, she kept his picture for a long time."

"Not so long. Maybe two years. She still gets letters from him, and she told everybody in the club that he got orders and he will be coming back soon."

"If she is waiting for him to come back to Korea, why would she leave here so suddenly?"

Miss Kwon shrugged. "I don't know."

Then it clicked. The whole thing. I slammed my palm down on the table. Ernie jumped back.

"What the . . ."

"We've been idiots, Ernie. If VonEric needed money to pay off gambling debts, where would he get it?"

"Well . . ."

"Sure. I'm going to call the first sergeant right now and let him know that we're going to be here a little while longer. We've got some paperwork to do."

Ernie frowned at that. But while I was on the phone behind the bar trying to get through to Seoul, he made sure to finish all the beer.

Word of our snooping would spread quickly, so I waited until Waitz was off duty to start going through the records of the Army Support Command Replacement Detachment. I compared some of the entries to the notes I had pilfered from VonEric's desk. As we went over the assignments for the last few months, Ernie started to see the pattern.

"Waitz has been diverting guys to posts in Korea where their specialty is not required."

"Right." I stood up and reached for my coat. "Let's get off base and find a taxi."

"Where are we going?"

"To Inchon."

"What the hell do you want to go there for?"

"They've got a nice place there I want to visit. The Olympos Hotel . . ."

"You don't need a room. Miss Kwon will put you up."

"I don't want a room. It's the other half of the title I'm interested in."

"What's that?"

"The Olympos Hotel and Casino."

The cab driver swerved rapidly through the countryside, and I kept telling him to slow down so we wouldn't slide off the slick roads. When we came over the crest of the hills surrounding Inchon, the huge harbor spread out below us like rippling green glass. Rusty merchant ships nodded lazily on the gentle waves like drunken sailors sleeping against lampposts. At the edge of the water, on a slight hill above the rest of the city, stood the Olympos Hotel. Half of its square eyes twinkled in the sunset.

Chandeliers, plush red carpet, beautiful women flashing brightly colored cards across green felt tables.

"Let's get out of this dump," Ernie said.

"I just want to see if he's here."

"Who?"

"Waitz."

There was not much of a crowd, since it was Monday night. A few Japanese tourists, a couple of high-rollers from Hong Kong at the baccarat ta-

ble, and a smattering of be-whiskered merchant marines. Although there wasn't much foliage for camouflage, I didn't have to take any extra precautions to conceal myself from Waitz. He was humped over one of the blackjack tables, jabbing his finger into the green felt when he wanted a hit, waving his hand from side to side when he wanted to stay. His small pile of chips dwindled and then disappeared before our eyes. Without looking up from his cards, he reached back into his wallet and pulled out another short stack of twenty dollar bills. The dealer arrayed them like a fan on the table, counted them quickly, and then made a pencil calculation converting them to won, the Korean currency. She pushed two small stacks of chips out to him, and Waitz dropped almost half of them into the betting circle.

We waited outside the hotel. I figured it wouldn't be long.

He walked through the lobby rubbing his face, and the red-coated attendant opened the door for him. I couldn't see his face, but his shoulders were still hunched and he stumbled a little as he walked. We put down the beers we had been drinking in the small garden overlooking the bay and followed.

His cab pulled up in front of Whiskey Mary's, one of the oldest establishments in Inchon's nightclub district. I told our driver to cruise by, and we watched Waitz walk in.

By the time Ernie and I peeped through the beaded doorway, Waitz was already too busy arguing with a Korean woman to notice us.

"Who is she?" Ernie said.

"Miss Yu Kyong-hui."

"How do you know?"

"Waitz and VonEric were both gambling. One out here at the casino, the other on football, placing bets with Austin. When Waitz got in too deep, he started taking bribes to give GI's choice assignments."

"If VonEric was in on it," Ernie said, "how did he get in so deep to Austin?"

"From checking the records, it looks like he wasn't taking any bribes. Maybe he figured he'd rather be in trouble with an illegal bookmaker than get caught by the army for abusing his official position and face a court-martial. But he worked in the same room with Waitz, so eventually he must have found out what Waitz was doing, or maybe Waitz told him, figuring to enlist him as a collaborator. Who knows? But when VonEric wouldn't go along with the program, it made Waitz nervous. Maybe

real nervous. And maybe VonEric even threatened to turn him in. The records were there, the ones we saw this afternoon. Enough to convict him, or at least build a hell of a case against him. If anybody knew about it."

"So Waitz decided to kill VonEric."

"Right." I jerked my thumb towards the club. "And he knew that Miss Yu Kyong-hui had jilted him, so he talked to her. It turned out they had something in common. Miss Yu's old boyfriend was infantry. He had probably just gotten lucky on his last tour to Korea and got assigned down here, maybe to the Special Forces detachment they got. But he probably wouldn't be so lucky again. It would be the DMZ for him. Miss Yu might not even be able to see him for weeks on end."

"And Division isn't real big on helping GI's get their marriage paperwork through."

"Right. So Waitz made a proposition to Miss Yu. Just take VonEric home with her, loosen a crack in her floor that was already there, and her boyfriend would get a choice assignment away from the DMZ and away from ASCOM City."

A shriek rippled through the beaded entranceway to the club. Ernie was first in. I

pushed my way through a gaggle of sweet-smelling business girls and found Ernie wrestling a bloodied knife away from Miss Yu. Waitz was on the floor. The wound in his neck was deep, and pumping blood out fast. I squeezed an artery and slowed it down, but no matter what parts of his loose flesh I grabbed, the red stuff kept coming out.

Miss Yu screeched and clawed at Ernie's face, like some great warrior bird come suddenly to life.

"He's got to fix the assignment!" she said. "I don't care about MP's. I don't care about C.I.D. I did what he wanted me to do, I made the hole bigger and let the gas in, now he must help me!"

Abruptly she stopped clawing at Ernie and squatted down into a little ball on the floor. Sobbing.

I held on to Waitz's neck until the Korean police burst through the door. But by then his big bleached Indian face was slack and devoid of life.



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# A Bad Night in Derbyville

by Judith L. Post

**I**t poured cats and dogs outside the diner's windows. I called Margie Neilsen and told her not to bother reporting in. I didn't expect many customers. Only a duck that lacked common sense would come out on a day like this.

I've owned Levicy's Gourmet Grub for nearly twenty years now, and I have to say I don't do half bad. When I first bought it, the place was a sorry heap at the edge of town. The floors were sticky with grease. The counters and tables were grimy, but Ma and Pa didn't raise me to be afraid of a little hard work.

"Any dirt that washes off is good, honest dirt," my ma always told me, and I've kept that in mind all these years. So, with some soap and water and a fresh coat of paint, I whipped that restaurant back to rights. I had a modest beginning, to say the least, but nothing worthwhile is easy. I dug in and held on till folks got used to me and I started making a profit. I've been solvent ever since.

Joe Freemont came out of the kitchen to sit next to me at the counter. "Miserable day," he said between sips of coffee. Joe had worked as a handyman on farms around Derbyville most of his life until his strong back went out on him and he found himself retired early with no pension. That's when I hired him as my chief cook and bottle washer. Even made a back room into a little apartment for him. It doesn't take much to make Joe happy—a roof over his head, a decent day's pay, and a word or two of gratitude. We have a lot in common.

"It's sleeting now. Not gonna be much business," he stated.

I nodded. It was the dead time between shifts. Usually at three thirty me and Paula Markle would be cleaning up from a big lunch crowd and setting tables to get ready for supper. Today, Joe and I sipped an extra cup of coffee and ate a piece of pie.

It was after five when the first trucker pulled in. By the time the poor man scurried from his cab and dashed through the front door, he was sopping wet.

"It's a bitch out there!" he grumbled, dripping water on my floor.

I threw him a clean towel from a stack I'd put on the counter.

"Dry off first. Then I'll pour you some coffee."

He grinned. "Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to come in here tracking water all over your diner, but I stopped at the motel down the road and it's filled up. I can barely see an inch in front of me. Thought I'd hole up here till the rain slowed a bit."

I took the pencil from behind my ear, poising it over my order pad. "Quit trying to sound so pitiful and drink some hot coffee. What'll it be? Joe's got a pot of stew fixed for our special, or you can order off the menu. Take your pick."

Most of my truckers are regulars who drive Highway 80 back and forth, crosscountry, day and night. If you've never heard of 80, it runs past my front yard and goes west all the way to Sacramento—to L.A. if you take the 70 split—and it goes east all the way to New York. Sitting in a diner in Nebraska is kind of like sitting in the center of things. Not a bad place to be.

The trucker shrugged himself onto a stool. "Stew sounds good."

I sloshed coffee into his cup and brought him his supper. There was bread and butter on the side with a lettuce salad to round things out.

He shoveled the food in greedily. I refilled his coffee cup until he couldn't hold no more. Then, when he'd finished, I said, "Now that you've got something warm in your stomach, you might want to go upstairs to the lounge. Settle in a while." He smiled his thanks and threw a couple of extra dollars on the counter.

The room over the diner isn't anything fancy, just some vinyl couches and a couple of showers. There's a TV set that doesn't get very good reception and an old radio, but it makes the truckers happy.

By the time six thirty rolled around, we were doing a passable business. One truck after another came into the parking lot to call it quits for the night. I usually have a grace period for the lounge, not wanting it to be home and hearth for any cheapskates, but tonight I bent the rules. It wasn't safe to drive, and every motel for miles flashed No Vacancy signs.

Between the two of us, Joe and I fed everyone and offered them all the comfort we could. Most of the booths were doubling as beds. By nine, I was ready to turn the sign in the window to CLOSED and douse the lights when another trucker pulled in.

"You're my last," I said, holding the door open against the rain. I flipped the sign and shut out the lights before turning to seat him. I should have guessed something by then. The chatty talk in

the booths had died down. Heads were straining to get a gander at the newcomer.

When I finally turned to look, I could understand the curiosity. Not only wasn't he a he, this trucker was one goodlooking young gal all fidgety with nerves. Nothing excites a trucker like a female in distress, especially a pretty one.

"Have you heard?" Her voice was like fingernails on a chalkboard, high and shrill. "I passed a truck that was tipped about twenty miles outside of town. Must have gone off the shoulder and rolled over."

"What kind of truck?" a voice asked from a booth.

"New. A black cab, lots of chrome. Red mud flaps."

"That's Sam Barnes's rig," someone said.

Joe walked to the CB radio and cranked up the volume. Between crackling static, I recognized Sheriff Martin's voice. Since his wife died a while ago, Pete's been coming to the diner for lunch every day. People are beginning to gossip that we're sweet on each other. For all I know, we might be.

"Gladys," he called in. "Did you get ahold of Corey yet?"

Corey is our local state trooper. That didn't sound good. If Pete was calling in reinforcements, Sam Barnes was in serious shape.

"We're gonna be here awhile," he said. "Doc made it a few minutes ago. The EMS is here, and Tom's working traffic. I'll get back to you later."

Joe and I looked at each other. Tom Lynx is the deputy sheriff. Whatever happened out there was major.

"This damn weather," one of the men said.

The lady trucker walked to the counter and sank down. Her hands were shaking. "They didn't let me see too much, but I think there was a stretcher with a sheet over it."

I reached for the coffeepot, but she covered her cup. "If I drink it now, I'll never be able to sleep tonight."

I wondered if she was worried about the caffeine or her nerves. "Something hot will warm you a little. Cocoa?"

She nodded and began to shrug herself out of her poncho. A smart idea. Umbrellas aren't worth much in weather like this.

I thought about Pete and the others working in the sleet and cold rain. I thought about a body on a stretcher lying outside with a sheet over it.

Ma and Pa had never told me that life would be easy, but some things hit you harder than others. It was a downright shame, dying

on a lonely stretch of road in the middle of a freak storm.

"You don't come this way often, do you?" I asked as I poured hot water over instant hot chocolate. I'd seen her a few times before. There are several women truckers who drive 80, but hardly any this young.

"Only once in a while." She held the hot mug with both hands, trying to warm them.

"Let me see what we've got in the kitchen."

I came back with the end of Joe's stew. Not bad for a dismal night. No leftovers. Almost guaranteed a good breakfast trade, too.

She ate all the vegetables, none of the meat, and sopped up the gravy with her bread and butter. I rinsed the plate and put it in the sink to do in the morning. She was dawdling over the last of her cocoa, so I refilled her cup and poured me some coffee from the bottom of the pot.

No one said much. We all had our ears tuned to the scanner.

Joe came around the counter and sat beside me. The truckers propped themselves up in booth corners to wait for more news. It was a long, quiet vigil until Pete Martin's cruiser pulled into the lot. He was creeping slower than a snail, but he still slid to a stop. The roads must have been slicker than a greased pig, and when he opened the door to step in, a gust of wind and water came with him.

I went to the kitchen and made more coffee. From the look on his face, it was going to be a long night.

"Levicy," he said, tipping his hat, "mind if I ask your customers a few questions, since you've got quite a few truckers stashed here for the night?"

"Be my guest."

"Is anyone upstairs, or are they all here?"

I went to herd everyone into the dining room and wondered what the heck was going on. When we were all together, Pete got started:

"You've probably all heard by now that Sam Barnes's rig rolled over a few miles out of town. He didn't have his seatbelt on, and he went through the front windshield. He doesn't look like much any more. The thing is, though . . ." Pete stalled for effect ". . . Sam was already dead before the accident."

There was a long silence. Then one of the truckers asked, "Did he have a heart attack, Pete? What are you saying exactly?"

"There was a deep gash in Sam's forehead. Someone hit him real hard before they put his truck in gear and sent it off the road."

Men shuffled their feet and slid their eyes off of each other. None of us missed the fact that it was a miserable night outside. The CB said that most of the roads were closed. A man couldn't go far if he wanted to. That meant Sam's killer could very well be in this room.

"Got any time frame in mind?" someone asked.

"When we got there, not much ice had built up on his truck. That was around eight thirty. He couldn't have been there long. The road was closed west of him, and it's not open too far east. That doesn't leave a lot of leeway."

We looked around at each other. The motel and hotel had been full at four thirty. Everyone else had come here.

"If you don't mind my asking," Pete said, "I'd like to know which of you pulled in here after seven." That slimmed the lead contenders down something considerable. "Levicy?" he asked. I squinted, remembering. I pointed to a tall, lean trucker in a red plaid flannel shirt. "Steve got in about then. So did George Roberts."

Everyone in Derbyville knew George. He operated the grain elevator in town. I scanned the rest of the faces. "The last person who came was the girl. She told us about the accident."

"Do you remember when you pulled in?" Pete asked, turning to the lady trucker.

She nodded, and short blonde curls bobbed around her face. It was a sweet face, heart-shaped with freckles. Twisting her fingers nervously, she said, "I looked at the clock on the back wall when I got my cocoa. It was eight forty-five."

Another set of headlights flashed through the front glass, and soon Tom Lynx ambled in. Tom is built like a young Viking with golden hair and sky blue eyes. If you look at him wrong, he blushes beet red.

"Tom, why don't you stay out here with these folks," Pete said, "while Levicy and me and the three latecomers have a little chat in her office?"

With a puppy dog shrug, Tom sat himself down next to Joe.

"I made some fresh coffee," I told him as the five of us left the room.

Pete settled himself behind my small desk. Years of doughnuts for breakfast and pies for dessert made my office chair creak in protest.

"It's like this," Pete said, digging through my things for a pencil and paper. "I might as well take your statements, since you're all

here. Why don't you tell me what you were doing out in the storm today?"

The trucker in the red plaid shrugged. "I had to make a delivery at Odessa before noon. Then I thought I'd beat it for home. Wanted to make Carson City by the weekend. Then the storm hit."

Pete's eyes slid to George.

George Roberts jammed his hands deep into his pockets and swallowed hard. Never was much of a talker. "I heard the report about the storm. It was supposed to come late this afternoon. Thought I could get a little work done at the granary before it hit. Guess I didn't time it too good because the next thing I knew the wind was howlin' across the fields and the roads were freezin' over fast. I still thought I could get home if I drove the big truck and was real careful, but I spun twice going five miles an hour. Saw that Levicy was open, so I decided to stop here."

The girl realized she was next and cleared her throat nervously. "I just picked up a delivery in Chicago and was trying to make time to L.A., even slept in the bed behind the front seat of my cab for a few hours instead of losing a whole night."

"Is that safe?" Pete asked.

She chewed her bottom lip. "Sure is. I lock the doors, and I have a big gun I know how to shoot stored right under the seat. I keep it loaded."

Pete's voice went gentle. "Sam Barnes didn't try anything with you, did he? If what happened today was accidental, in self-defense, you don't have to be afraid to tell me."

She winced. "God, no! I mean, I would, but it didn't."

"You weren't sleeping in your cab, riding out the storm, when Sam maybe stopped by?"

"No!"

Pete shrugged. "It was just an idea. Thought I might as well ask."

She folded her slim arms over her chest. "All I did was see the accident and get so scared I figured I'd better find someplace to ride out the storm. It's the first real bad weather I've worked in."

Pete nodded, then said, "Until I learn otherwise, you three are the best suspects I've got. I'm going to have to do a background check on you, and I don't want you to leave Derbyville until you clear it with me."

"Will that take long?" the red plaid asked. "I've already lost time to the storm."

"I'll do my best," Pete promised. "Probably burn the midnight oil." He opened the office door and motioned them out. "You stay put," he told me. Then he fetched two cups of coffee and closed the door again. "Any woman's intuition?" he asked, seating himself on the corner of my desk so I could have the chair. Truth is, I was mighty glad to sit. Being a waitress is hard on the legs and feet. Late at night, they bark pretty loud.

I took a few sips of coffee while I wrestled with my questions. "There is something that's worrying me," I told him. "Being a man, you probably think it's nothing, but still . . ." I hesitated. "George Roberts has come in here ever since I bought the diner. A good man who works hard. And every time he's running late or stuck in town, without fail, he calls his wife. I've always thought that was pretty decent of him, so she doesn't sit at home worrying herself sick. Tonight, though, when the streets are pure ice and a wife could go crazy fretting, he never once used the phone."

Pete frowned. "He probably called from the granary."

"Could be, but he said he thought he was going to make it home, remember, until he slid all over 80? So wouldn't he call to tell her he was holing up here?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Sam Barnes goes through Derbyville a lot," I said. "He's a handsome man, and single. George Roberts works long hours. He has a wife that's some years younger than he is."

Pete's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Suppose George found out Sam stopped at his house sometimes? He wouldn't hurt his wife. He's devoted to her. But Sam's another story. Jealousy's pretty hard to swallow."

Pete reached for the phone. "Maybe I'd better call Meg and see what she has to say." While he dialed, I left the office. I walked to the counter and filled my cup again. If the caffeine didn't keep me awake all night, my bladder probably would.

A short time later, Pete opened the office door, and I could tell by the strain lines around his mouth and eyes that Meg had told him what he didn't want to hear. He walked to where George was and said, "Can we talk?"

George's shoulders hunched forward, and all the starch went out of him. I looked away. It was sorry to see.

The next morning, weak sunlight struggled through the gray

clouds. The weather was still nothing to brag about, but the highway was safe. A bunch of stiff, ugly-looking truckers lined up at the counter for their fill of food and an early start.

Joe and I did our best to feed them, but we were happy to see the last of them. It had been a long night. The young girl was the only one left. She'd waited for everyone else to go before she took a quick shower. When she came down all perky and pretty, I shook my head. "How did a sweet little thing like you ever get into a business like this?"

She smiled. "My daddy was a trucker, and we were always moving from one place to another. My mom died when I was young. I spent summer vacations on the road with my old man. Loved every minute of it. Dropped out of school when I was sixteen so I could drive with him. Been driving ever since."

I nodded. That seemed to be the way of it. Wheels rolling under you got to be an addiction of sorts. "Next time you're in Derbyville, you stop in here again," I told her. "Your meal's on me. Every time you're in town."

She grinned. "I'm gonna take you up on that."

Then I filled her thermos and handed her a paper bag with a lunch in it and watched her pull away. It made me feel almost motherly, like I was sending a kid away to school or something.

I shook my head. "Joe, you got anything against putting your feet up and recuperating today?" I asked him.

"I don't think I got a lick of sleep last night," he said.

"Me neither." I turned the sign on the door to CLOSED and said, "See you tomorrow."

I was crossing the highway to my bungalow when Pete's cruiser pulled beside me. He opened the front door and motioned for me to slide in, then he threw a colored brochure in my lap. Opening the front page, I saw that it was an advertisement for the Buffalo Bill State Park. Pete and I have always talked about going there. A handmade coupon was stapled to its front corner. It said, "Good for one free trip. Courtesy Derbyville Law Enforcement."

"Your reward for helping in an investigation. Besides, I figured both of us needed to get away today. George confessed to everything. Corey took him away this morning."

I sighed. Pete was right. I usually love listening to the small talk and gossip of Derbyville, but not today. I scanned through the pages of the brochure. Today, people would have to feed themselves. I was on vacation.



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# Don't Call Me

by Robert Gray

**F**or what it's worth, Fred thinks one prospect might buy something small next week. He is supposed to "get back" to her. Any modest optimism this thread of hope might have induced has been shattered by his last call of the day, however. It was pointless and frustrating and might just cost him his job. Words were exchanged. He lost his temper.

That isn't his style at all. He meant to hang up and take the rejection in noble silence like all the others; live to fight another day. At the last second, he made a stupid remark about the guy's future in the business world; something about a chimpanzee being able to rent videotapes. That's when it started. He can't remember the exact words, but he's sure he will hear them soon enough when they are thrown back in his face upstairs.

They clashed before, Fred and the video guy. Fred's company backed the client last time. If the guy decides to call and complain now, it will definitely be a major problem. The

magazine is not known for crossing advertisers, no matter how arrogant and insulting. And Fred hasn't exactly been establishing sales records lately.

He was shut out again today; three straight without a bite. Only a couple of possibles in the two weeks before that. Selling advertising space in a recession is a lose-lose situation. You can exaggerate benefits and downplay charges, even plead and wheedle, but in the end only three things can happen, and only one is good. They can say no to everything. They can say yes, then stiff you after publication. Or they can say yes, pay on time, and consider running again in the next issue, maybe even signing a long term contract. That is the Holy Grail of advertising sales, but Fred has almost forgotten what selling a long term contract feels like.

He is also supposed to call an advertiser in last month's issue and ask when payment can be expected. He hasn't done that yet. He hates collection work, and is not supposed to be doing it. Mr. Jensen asked him on

this particular one as a personal favor because "you get along so well with the client."

It isn't true, but Fred did not argue the point. He did, however, stare at the phone all day between infrequent sales calls, knowing he should contact the delinquent account, feeling guilty about not doing so, but physically unable to pick up the receiver. Whenever he thought about making the call, his arms were too weak to move and the telephone seemed to grow larger and more threatening. Sometime after lunch he decided to stall by telling Mr. Jensen, if he asked, that the person he has to speak with is out until Monday. That will give Fred the weekend to prepare himself for the dirty work.

Collection is the crummiest job in the place. That is why nobody ever stays on it for long, and why everyone from salesmen to secretaries to the office manager is pressured to go after stubborn accounts. Advertising is a product that has already been used by the time people are supposed to pay for it. If they decide not to advertise again, it can take forever to squeeze the money out of them.

Once they have paid up, however, you are supposed to go after them again for advertising as if nothing had happened, as if you hadn't spent all that

time calling them thieves. Ideally, collection and ad sales remain separate entities to keep the clients from associating salesmen with any more negativity than they already do. Ideals are seldom achieved.

Shut out . . . Fred thinks about that as he reaches for the newspaper on the floor beside his chair. He dropped it there this morning because Mr. Jensen stormed into his office as soon as he got in. The boss put the hammer down about banging the phones all day. After that, Fred thought reading the paper to get in the mood did not seem like such a good idea.

Shut out . . . The lady with the Styrofoam begging cup and shopping cart full of black trash bags, who stationed herself in front of his building every day, made more money today than Fred did. She didn't work her sales pitch half as hard either, just a moan here and a pitiful look there. He would try it himself if he thought it would work on advertisers. Maybe she'd consider taking on a partner.

Reading the newspaper does not help his mood. In the first three pages alone, he finds enough bad news to confirm every prejudice he already has about this damn city. Two men argued over loud music while their cars were stopped at a

traffic light. One picked up a shotgun from his seat and blew away the other. The idiot then sped off as if the dozens of cars behind him wouldn't take down his license number. A bum was torched for kicks by some teens. A little kid disappeared from a playground in a nice neighborhood. The other kids said a man dressed in a "doctor suit" told the girl that her parents had been in an accident, and she left with him. The son of a bitch.

For the second time in a week, while women were sitting in parked cars, men opened the passenger side doors, got in, and forced the women to drive out of town. They were robbed and they were raped. It is random violence; the waning vital signs of a terminal patient. Fred thinks that if the city was in a hospital, there would be no debate about whether to continue life support systems.

Pull the plug.

The digital clock on his desk blinks five P.M. Sometimes he stays later to make a few West Coast phone calls to national accounts, but on a day like this the best thing is to just get out, go home or to a bar, forget about it, let it slide. If he stays any longer, one of the lights on his phone will start glowing a

frightening red, accompanied by a demonic buzz. Mr. Jensen will be calling for an end-of-day rundown. That is the best case scenario. Fred doesn't even want to think about the alternative. If the video guy has already called, he does not want to be around to hear about that.

Monday he can face it. The stinking brew of "No, thank you" and "Not at this time" and "He's in a meeting" will have a couple of days to cook. He can drown it in gravy by the time he meets with Mr. Jensen; make it look more like "maybe" and "probable" and "looks good"; buy some time. There are still two weeks until deadline, so the pressure is not full force yet. If he cuts and runs today, he will be fresher for Monday, really attack those phones and break out of this slump. Maybe. He is so tired now he can hardly keep his eyes open.

In the elevator, Fred glances at the sports pages and entertainment section. More news about drug busts, gambling scandals, and lawsuits, with here and there a box score or movie review to justify the section banners. No wonder nobody wants to advertise any more. Why associate yourself with a criminal element? People are not likely to read a page

filled with stories about financial misdealings, political graft, and public misery, then glance at an advertisement and decide it's a good time to buy a car or take the family out to dinner.

That very point was emphasized repeatedly this afternoon by Al Mongeluso, the gruff little pain in the butt who runs three low-grade video rental outlets in the city. They are hole in the wall operations that only Mongeluso sees as constituting a chain. To Fred, the term chain implies more than finding desperately underpriced inner city storefront properties, stuffing a couple of hundred videos and a counter clerk inside, and calling it a "franchise operation."

The guy bought an ad once, and Fred dutifully calls him every month to get an earful of unjustified abuse. Fred calls everybody on his hit list. That is his job. "Maintaining close personal contacts with our clients" is how Mr. Jensen describes it.

Mongeluso told him he would advertise again when the magazine started covering "good news," but declined to say where this elusive material was hiding lately. Ad location was another big thing with Mongeluso, Fred recalls. When his half-page, vertical, black and white ad originally ran,

Mongeluso demanded placement on the first right hand page available. He wanted page three, but that was already reserved for color ads. The first available black and white slot was on page twenty-three. Mongeluso got it, even though they had to bump a longtime, but understanding, advertiser to page twenty-seven.

Then Mongeluso insisted on having the ad built in-house at a special rate. He got that. When the issue finally came out, he called in a frenzy and said his phone number was all wrong. It was the same one he had written on the mockup he originally faxed to the production department. He said they should have checked the Yellow Pages.

Mongeluso called Mr. Jensen. He threatened not to pay his bill. He eventually was given a reduction in price and a second placement in the next issue free of charge. For six months after that time, he answered Fred's calls with a tirade about their lousy service in getting his ad to print; the complete lack of business generated by it; and the high rates that were unfair to small businessmen. Each time Fred gritted his teeth and said thank you anyway. He always promised to call again next month.

Mongeluso always said don't bother. But Fred called and Mongeluso took the calls.

Until today's debacle, Fred thought he could handle it. He didn't think Mongeluso would ever advertise again, but the call shielded him from Mr. Jensen's inevitable questions about the account. Rejection is better than the perception that you aren't even trying. Until today it worked okay.

Fred starts the car, which does its usual bump and grind routine for several seconds before catching just enough to fire. He loves new cars, but business being what it is, he still drives the Chevy he bought when he first started with the magazine more than four years ago. The car has seventy thousand miles on it, all tough, stop and go city travel that probably makes the engine wear equivalent to twice that mileage on the open road. He has paid enough repair and towing bills to back up that theory.

His car allowance from the company is minuscule. He is paid for distance traveled, not time spent waiting in traffic. He does more selling on the phone than in his car anyway. A new car is just another dream. His dreams don't come true any more.

What will happen if the recession continues? He thinks about this as he waits for the car to warm up. It stalls out all the way home if he doesn't let it go through its mechanical stretching routine, kind of a prelude to high impact, inner city carobics.

If business continues to decline, Fred sees himself fading and wearing out just like his car. His suits will be threadbare, his body wasted away from lack of nourishment. His weary arms will barely be able to lift the ponderous telephone and beg one more client for just a scrap of advertising, a little business card placement even, enough for a meal. Will he end up with the bag lady out front after losing his office, a filthy cardboard sign around his neck reading "I'll trade advertising for food"?

Nobody cares. Mr. Jensen doesn't care. Mr. Jensen hired three part-time telemarketers to "free you up for the big accounts," he said. Fred knows they are the future, however; those adolescent telewhores. They will cold call for subscriptions as well as ads, work for a fraction of his commission and no benefits. Since so many of the clients don't want to hear about advertising during a recession anyway, they won't care if the people they shoot

down are professional salesmen or college kids looking to earn the price of a keg of beer for the weekend.

Fred pulls out of the underground parking lot and waves to Jake, the rent-a-cop guard at the entrance. He thinks about how simple life would be if he could just sit there all day like Jake, breathing exhaust fumes and reading mystery novels for six bucks an hour.

He eases his way across the sidewalk, then noses into rush hour traffic, waving thanks to a red BMW that hasn't so much let him into the line as backed off from the imminent possibility of collision. The BMW driver leans on his horn as his way of saying "you're welcome."

As he sits waiting for a light to change, Fred considers how ludicrous the word "drive" is to describe how he gets in and out of the city every day. He looks at the crowds on the sidewalks as they seem to flash by him. When the light changes and he creeps forward, he still can't catch up to the pace of the pedestrians before he has to stop at the next light. He knows it will be like this all the way to the bridge, and over the bridge, and halfway home, like every other goddam day.

Not today. He pulls down a

one-way side street that is barely wide enough for his car. It is supposed to be a two lane street, but cars and trucks are illegally parked on both sides, leaving a single narrow passage through the middle for traffic.

The street is three blocks long, with four-way stops at the intersections. Fred doesn't care. He feels he has to keep moving, whatever the direction. That is all that matters. To stop now is to cease living. To move is to survive.

He bulls his way across three lanes and takes the next left, a one block alleyway that deposits him down by the river at a long, two lane road called The Loop, which is less congested even at this hour because it does not really take you anywhere you need to go unless you are willing to brave the mean streets of some of the worst sections of town.

Fred just keeps driving, turning down unfamiliar streets, keeping the river in sight when possible for guidance, until he finds himself in a small business district. A dozen brick buildings, none more than four stories high, flank the street. Most of the storefronts are boarded up, except for an occasional sign of life here and there. Colorful graffiti, poor man's neon, covers the walls of

the buildings and the rotting plywood nailed over shattered plate glass windows.

People are watching Fred drive by. He can feel their eyes. They loiter on the street in front of the handful of open businesses. He doesn't want to look at their faces, to turn them into real people, but he can't help himself. He stares back at white faces, brown faces, black faces, faces of every color and description; a rainbow of hatred and resentment directed at him as he slowly drives past. It does not meet with Fred's image of the inner city, where everyone is supposed to cling to their own turf.

He feels like he is the common foe who has united these desperate people somehow. He wants to tell them about the rough times in the publishing industry, the diminutive size of his commission checks in recent months, the grind of a three hour daily commute. He does not see the potential for understanding or sympathy in all those wasted, angry eyes.

He stops the car, then pulls into a parking space between a delivery truck and the abandoned hulk of an Oldsmobile.

Nobody pays much attention to him once he stops moving. Like the rest of the world lately, they write him off. Au-

turn is in the air, and Fred starts to feel a chill a few minutes after he shuts off the car's engine. It will be dark by six thirty, and when he glances at his watch, the hands confirm what the gathering shadows are already telling him. He should go home.

Instead, like the people hanging out on the street, his peers now, he watches passing cars and hates them, too; watches the world glide by on its way somewhere better, anywhere out of here. He sees them approach in his side mirror, many now with headlights on in the gathering dusk. They pass by and disappear. He tries to count all the cars he sees that cost more than twenty thousand dollars, and after a half hour the total is still zero.

Finally a car fitting that description, with two women inside, approaches and stops, doubleparking with its front end effectively blocking his way out. This pisses him off. The passenger gets out. Several minutes pass, and Fred seethes about being blocked in. Before he had nowhere to go. Now he can't wait to get there.

Then he sees the man.

In his side mirror, Fred notices the door on the passenger side open suddenly and a man



gets into the car. The woman seems angry and shouts something at him. Fred adjusts his mirror with the inside lever to get a better view. The man is yelling now. The woman nods stiffly, reaches for the gear shift, and begins to drive away.

Fred starts his car and hurries to catch up, trying to decide what he should do. He thinks about the newspaper stories and knows he can't just let this go until he is sure what is happening. He checks the license plate and scribbles the number in the margin of the newspaper lying on the seat beside him. He adds a description of the car. He turns the paper around and writes down everything he notices about the people in the car: the woman's blonde hair, her large nose, which he sees in profile when she looks to her right, the man's shaggy brown hair, hanging over his collar and ears.

Fred stays back as far as possible without taking the chance of losing them. He doesn't think the woman will notice, and the guy has no reason to think anybody is following. The man is doing most of the talking as far as he can tell. The woman grips the wheel with both hands. She drives at the speed limit through the city.

They follow The Loop around the outskirts of the downtown

area, then enter the flow of traffic that is working its way toward the bridge. It is now dark, and only the street lights and the large, square taillights on the car in front of him permit Fred to maintain contact as they gradually become engulfed in traffic. The worst part of rush hour is over, but it is still slow going.

As Fred passes by the last mini mart before the bridge, he considers stopping to call the police, but all he would be able to tell them is that the car is leaving the city. By the time they track it down, something terrible could already have happened. He stays with the pursuit.

The car's speed increases as it leaves the bridge behind and hits the parkway. It is not exceeding the limit, though, and Fred wonders if the man is telling her not to do anything that might attract attention. After they have gone about five miles away from the city, the car takes an exit, and Fred follows. They are the only two cars that get off the highway at that point.

The exit ramp ends at Route 22, and the car bears left, heading away from the small town for which the exit was originally constructed. Fred waits until the taillights are nearly out of sight before leaving the



exit ramp to follow. He doesn't want to attract attention. He has no weapon in the car, and he certainly doesn't consider himself a threat to anyone, especially that guy in the other car. What could he possibly do to stop anything that might happen? He recalls a news story he read about a cab driver who apprehended a mugger by pinning him against a wall with his taxi, but doesn't see himself doing it.

Can he intimidate this guy just by arriving at the scene and flashing his headlights? He will keep his doors locked and can drive away if the guy comes after him. What if he has a gun? Fred knows he can't just abandon the poor woman to save himself. He will have to do something.

He is still sorting through his options when he realizes that the taillights are no longer in view.

Fred speeds up, but knows they turned off and he missed it. He panics. He finds a little country store and a pay phone. He dials 911, hoping it works this far from the city. It does. The voice at the other end listens to him but doesn't understand, asks him to repeat things over and over. He can't make his mouth cooperate with his brain. He hopes he has at

least managed to get across the basic facts.

Fred runs back to his car. He backtracks, looking for a side road he missed the first time through. He finds it about a mile from the store, turns onto it, slows to a crawl, and switches off his headlights. He moves very slowly, letting his eyes adjust to the moonlight. The road is paved, and the yellow center line provides some guidance.

He spots the car a few hundred yards ahead as he rounds a sharp curve. It has pulled off into a parking area, and its parking lights are still on. Fred stops dead in the road and waits, engine running. He can see the two silhouettes in the other car. Their heads have moved closer together.

He watches them, waiting for a sign of danger. There seems to be an intense argument going on, but no hint of violence. If he moves in too soon, Fred is afraid the woman will be hurt or used as a shield. Maybe the best thing is to sit tight until he is sure something really bad is happening, and hope the police get here in time so he won't have to become involved.

Then he sees the man raise his hand and the woman duck. The man hits her, and Fred knows he can't wait for the police. He puts his car in gear,

pulls up behind the other car, then twists the lever that turns on his headlights. High beam.

Two faces look through the back window of the other car, both showing fear. Then the man's expression turns to anger, and he waves a fist at Fred, the same fist he used to hit the woman. The man is yelling. He reaches into the back seat and grabs something. He opens his door, gets out, and comes around the car, walking toward Fred. The woman stays inside.

Fred shifts his car into reverse and backs away at the same pace that the man, brandishing his weapon, advances. It is decision time. Fred's mind is clear and focused despite the danger, clearer than it has been for days, weeks, months. He has a decision to make, weighs his options with clarity of thought, and takes action.

The man is standing his ground, still yelling at Fred, who shifts into drive, lets his foot slide off the brake pedal. He is not nervous. His hands are steady on the wheel. He jams his foot down hard on the gas pedal before the man in his headlights can react.

Fred drives straight into him, hits the large, round body square like a linebacker, and pushes him back as he was drilled to do in high school foot-

ball practice; drives him back and does not let up until he feels the thud as he rams the rear of the other car.

The man does not move, cannot move. One headlight has been shattered by the impact. Fred switches off the other. He doesn't want to look. He can hear the police sirens now. They will call the rescue squad when they get here, fix this bum so he can do time.

Fred feels strange. He did what he had to do, but he is not a violent man and the after-effects have made him a little nauseated. A woman's face appears at his window. Her left eye is swollen, nearly closed, and tears are streaming down her cheeks. Her fists are pounding the glass.

Mr. Jensen is the only one in the place on Saturdays. He makes a pot of coffee, then goes to his office with a fresh cup and the morning paper. He unfolds it on his lap and sees the gruesome, flash-assisted photo of a body pinned between two vehicles, along with fuzzy inset photos of one of his salesmen and one of his clients. The first thought that crosses his mind is that the eighty-five line screen used to shoot halftones for the newspaper does a lousy job compared to the one hundred thirty-three line screen

used by his magazine on photos for glossy stock. He knows this reaction is a safety valve, a way to deflect the shock. He sips his coffee.

The only reason he recognizes Al Mongeluso is that the guy called him yesterday to bitch about Fred. When Jensen tried to call Fred's office, he discovered Fred had ducked out early. Jensen planned to stew about it over the weekend and nail his ass to the wall Monday. Fred's days were numbered anyway.

The headline screamed, "Ad Man Rams Vid Man." The article screamed as well. According to the reporter, Fred had apparently staked out Mongeluso's main video outlet in the city. Witnesses at the scene remembered a car fitting the description and a guy sitting in it out front for a long time.

Fred followed Mongeluso to his home in the country. Mongeluso's wife was in the car, and according to her, they were arguing in their driveway, a crescent shaped area carved out of the hill that led up to their home. Mrs. Mongeluso was upset because her husband had insisted on letting their daughter work the closing shift at the shop. She did not think it was safe and wanted to return to the city and work with her daughter. Mongeluso

would not hear of it.

Fred appeared on the scene from nowhere, she said, still unaware of who he was or why he wanted to hurt them. Mongeluso reacted to Fred's appearance by grabbing a golf club, a putter to be specific, and leaving the car for a confrontation.

One thing led to another, and soon Mongeluso was a sandwich and Fred was behind bars. Mrs. Mongeluso's only injury was a black eye she said she received when the cars collided and her face hit the steering wheel.

Jensen winced when he read the next sentence, which mentioned the magazine and its parent corporation. They had not made the connection yet between Mongeluso and Fred as far as advertising was concerned. No mention was made of yesterday's phone confrontation, either. It would come out soon enough. The article did say that the reporter had tried to reach Jensen at home last night but could only get an answering machine. Jensen seldom checked his machine on Saturday mornings. That was the day to catch up on last week's work, not look for additional problems.

They were all probably looking for him now: the media, the police, the magazine's owners

or their lawyers. What a royal pain in the ass Fred had become.

He had been useless for months now. Jensen had tried to dump him, but the guys in legal said there must be a strong paper trail first. It wasn't a simple matter to fire a guy for lagging sales performance during a recession in the publishing industry. So Jensen had been keeping a file. He planned to write up Fred soon for something just to get things started.

How about murdering a client?

They haven't told him all the details yet, but from what Fred can gather thus far, he apparently is in protective custody. The guy he caught last night must have some bigtime connections, maybe even organized crime.

At first, Fred considered asking for a phone so he could make some sales calls and put his time to good use, but the guard he had during the night, and the one on duty this morn-

ing, were in such foul moods he left them alone.

It is now nine A.M., and he has changed his mind completely about the phone. He feels a wonderful sense of peace, a warm, pleasant glow of total surrender. He is free for awhile. He will not have to sit through a day of rejection and failure. No one will turn him down today, hang up on him, ignore him. He can't be shut out again if he doesn't even try to sell anything. It's like having a game called on account of rain. Everybody gets a rain-check. Don't bother me.

A day or two of rest until they decide how to handle his situation might be just what he needs; just the thing to get him fresh and ready for work again. He can use the rest. He wonders if he qualifies for the witness protection program. Get away from it all, a fresh start. He has earned it.

The guard is at his door, looking in. Fred smiles and waves.

"Don't call me. I'll call you," he says brightly.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

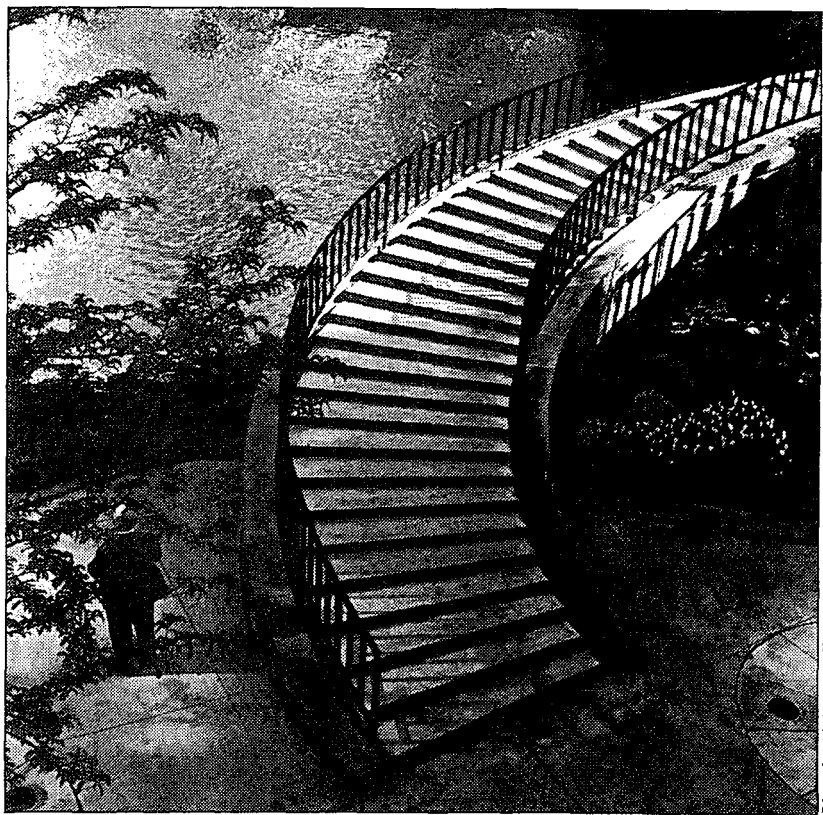


Photo by Algimantas Kerys

The Stair Case. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "Mid-December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 283.

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# The Silver Snuffbox

by Josephine Bell

**T**he wide front steps and pillared entrance to St. Edmund's hospital lay in darkness, seemingly deserted. The busy traffic that went up and down, to and fro, at all hours of the day—traffic made up of patients, relations of patients, nurses, auxiliaries, students, resident staff, visiting doctors, distinguished consultants, messengers, orderlies, porters, and all kinds of official and unofficial visitors—had ceased. For it was after midnight, and though the night porter on the main door was sitting in his box just inside the entrance, reading his newspaper and slowly stirring a large cup of tea, he did not expect to have any call upon his services for the next three or four hours. The casualty department, at the other end of the main building, was the active one at this hour.

All the same he was not absorbed in his paper. From time to time he would peer out the window of his box, directing his gaze at the big double doors, one of which stood partly open. After fixing his eyes for a few seconds on the dark crack between the doors he would purse his lips and shake his head gently before returning to his seat. After all, the staff dance was over; the distant blare of music and hum of voices had died down; the visitors had crowded out onto his steps and found their cars and driven away. And then this pair had come along and they must be outside somewhere because *he* was on duty and *she* ought certainly to be off home by now. The crack in the door was letting in a perishing draft. Time they broke it up. Lowering the place.

For the two standing close together in the pillared porch, time did not exist. Nor place. A streak of golden light lay on the top step, shining through the crack between the doors. The two pale figures were dim against the darkness beside it. He had already exchanged his dinner jacket for his white hospital coat. Her loose coat hung away from her full ice-blue chiffon dance dress. Standing together so quietly they might have been a single sculpture filling the corner of the porch.

They had danced nearly every dance together that night, they

had talked through every interval, making up for the six weeks of separation since Clare had left the hospital. For the girl the evening had held sheer, untroubled joy. There had been no mistaking Dan's feelings for her, and she had no longer tried to conceal her own deep love for him. But Dan, knowing he had won her, resented more than ever her desertion as he called it. Longing to declare his love and his firm intention of making her his wife, this resentment held back the true words. His arms tightened around her, but he said nothing.

At last Clare stirred and sighed, a lazy, contented sigh of pure happiness.

"I must go," she said slowly, and the trite words struck at her heart, tearing it in two.

"I can't go with you," he answered, a bitter note in his voice.

"I know. I ought to have left with Meg."

"You ought to be walking over the road. I could have gone that far."

She looked towards the Nurses' Home, where lights still shone in many of the windows.

"You didn't *have* to go to your blasted agency or whatever they call it."

"Nursing Association," she said, and left it at that. She had told Dan so often why she had resigned from the hospital to take up private nursing. She needed the money to help with her young brother's training. The grant was not enough; there were clothes and all sorts of extras, and her widowed mother had scraped and stinted herself for years.

Dan felt her draw away. He was sorry he had spoken like that. It was not at all how he had meant to leave things that evening.

"Come back," he said, drawing her close again. "Say goodnight to me, if you must go."

As he bent his head to kiss her, the words he had withheld came flooding back into his mind. He could not let her go without speaking them.

"Clare," he murmured. "Darling, you know how I feel about—"

The golden crack of light beside them widened. The porter's voice, grating, disapproving, spoke from behind the door.

"Your lights are up, sir. Ambulance in Casualty."

"Damn Casualty," said Dan softly and aloud. "All right. I'm coming."

Clare drew his head down and kissed him gently.



"I'll get a taxi at the Circus," she said and ran quickly down the steps.

Dan waited until the sound of her heels died away on the road outside the hospital. Then he turned and went in. The porter was sitting in his box, his head bent over his newspaper. He did not look up as Dan passed him.

Clare walked on without looking back. She did not feel particularly uneasy over the problem of getting back to her association's residential headquarters in the West End. This was partly because she knew from several years of experience that there were always a few taxis at the rank in the Circus at any hour of the day or night. But chiefly it was because her thoughts drifted in a golden mist of happiness that had enveloped her more and more closely as the evening went by and Dan's intentions grew overwhelmingly clear.

The shortest way to the Circus, where five great highways met, lay through several quiet streets where old fashioned Victorian houses, formerly respectable and middle-class, were slowly sinking into decay, their stucco peeling, their railings bent and broken, their rooms occupied by the drifting host of the incapable, the dull, the unlucky, the merely unfortunate.

Not all the houses presented this depressing exterior. Here and there, where one of them had anticipated the future of the rest and had already been demolished, its place was taken by a small, sharp, square, many-windowed block of flats. In one of these Clare noticed lights burning behind drawn curtains and heard jazz softly playing. Most of the windows in the street were dark.

She turned the corner into Stone Street. Here the houses were of similar build but rather better kept, some of them being used for business purposes, offices, warehouses, and the like. She took no notice of them as she passed, nor of the brass plates on several of the railings. The scene was quite familiar to her, and her eyes were on the glow of lights in the distance where one of the big highways joined the Circus. She was still intent upon it when she suddenly tripped and nearly fell.

Recovering herself with a little spring that lost her one of her high-heeled shoes, she looked down at the obstacle. It was the arm of a man who lay at the edge of the pavement on his back, his right arm flung out, his left doubled up under his body.

With a little shocked exclamation, Clare stooped over him. It



was difficult to see in the dim light, for the only street lamp on her side of the road was some distance away. But his total lack of response to her stumble was enough to tell her that the man was unconscious or dead. She picked up the limp arm over which she had nearly fallen and felt for the pulse. It was just there, weak, thready, irregular. Hemorrhage, she instantly thought. Where from?

Her responses were quite automatic, swift, trained, calm. Find the source, if possible, do something about it, again if possible.

She did not have to search far. The head, face, upper limbs, and trunk showed no obvious signs of damage. But a sticky patch at the hem of the jacket led her on. The man was lying in a pool of blood from a gaping stab wound in his left thigh. Hemorrhage indeed, and likely to be fatal if she could not stop it.

Bundling up the trouser leg to a point above the wound she snatched off her silk stole and bound it round the leg. Then, gripping the hard roll of trouser, she twisted it with one hand while with the other she searched the man's pockets for something to make a tourniquet. He seemed to have no papers of any kind; no wallet. Her first thought, that this was a road accident casualty abandoned by the car that had struck him down, turned now to an even more chilling conclusion. He had been assaulted and robbed and left to die.

At last her searching fingers found a hard object, an oblong box that seemed to be made of metal, and in the same waistcoat pocket a fountain pen. Working fast but carefully, she laid the object in the folds of trouser over the great artery of the thigh, caught up the ends of her long stole, and fixed it there, tying the ends of the stole again and slipping the fountain pen below the knot, where she twisted it to increase the pressure still further.

She straightened herself, out of breath but still intent upon the job in hand. She hoped she had controlled the hemorrhage; it was too dark to see. She must now at once summon help.

Looking about her desperately, she felt a surge of anger. Were there no police anywhere? No copper patrolling these streets that had suddenly, for her, taken on a most evil appearance? She gazed at the lighted thoroughfare in the distance, where traffic moved even at this hour. Why did no car come down Stone Street? Or no single other person?

With a little gasp of satisfaction she suddenly realized there was a telephone call box standing in a recess behind the one lighted

lamp farther along the street. That was the answer.

She stooped quickly and once again felt the man's pulse. It was still there; no better, no worse. No worse. Her work must have done some good, at least.

In a second she had slipped off her second shoe and was running up the road. The call box was about a hundred yards off, and Clare had run so fast that she was quite out of breath when she reached it. She pulled open the door and leaned against the side of the box to recover. It would be useless to dial 999 until she was able to speak. Fortunately she knew the name of the street and gave it clearly with a brief description of where the wounded man lay.

"I'm a nurse," she said crisply. "The case is very urgent indeed. He's lost a great deal of blood."

When she had put down the receiver, she began to walk back quickly, still rather out of breath. After the lighted box and the light of the street lamp, the darkness beyond rose up like a wall between her and the man she already thought of as her patient. But gradually her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and she then saw on the pavement a greater bulk than she had left.

She began to hurry forward even faster. Had he come round and was he trying to sit up? If so, he might disturb her bandage and tourniquet and start bleeding again. Why were all patients so unpredictable?

She drew nearer and then saw that the wounded man still lay flat at the edge of the pavement, but that there was another figure, whether man or woman she could not see, bending over him.

Relieved beyond measure at finding another helper on the scene, she shouted cheerfully, "I've phoned the ambulance. It'll be here any minute now."

She saw the figure start and the pale disc of a face come up to stare at her. Then, in an instant, the form was upright and running away into the darkness with long strides and a clatter of shoes on the pavement.

"Come back!" Clare cried at the top of her voice. "Come back!"

She started to run herself, not in pursuit but in sudden fear for the wounded man. She reached his side, flung herself on her knees beside him, and felt for her bandage. The pen was gone, the knot was untied, the oblong box had disappeared, too. All her work was undone, and the victim, once more, was at the point of death.

There was nothing she could do now but twist her bandage again and dig her fingers into the groove between the thigh muscles,

where she could no longer feel any pulsation. She held on desperately, hoping that she was compressing the artery but no longer sure of it.

She was furious with the meddler who had spoiled her work, but as she waited fear chilled her anger. What if the figure she had seen had acted, not in clumsy stupidity, but from deliberate evil purpose? Not through bungling but with intent to kill, to finish a job already begun?

As she thought of this her fear grew. She had called out twice. She had certainly declared her interest in saving the wounded man. This unseen, but now suspected, enemy had run off to avoid being identified later. But would he come back? She was sure now that it had been a man. Those long strides and heavy footfalls. What if he came back? What could she do? How defend herself?

The ambulance turned the corner of the street not more than five minutes after Clare's call reached the depot, but to her, crouching above her patient, seeing furtive movement in every shadow, it seemed an eternity.

But there it was at last, with two St. John men in charge, drawing up at the pavement, pulling open the doors, rattling down the steps, drawing out the stretcher and blankets.

"This the casualty, miss?"

"Yes," Clare answered with enormous relief. "I phoned from up the road. I'm afraid he's pretty bad. A wound in his leg."

The man looked about.

"They said there was a nurse in charge? She left?"

"No, of course not. I'm the nurse."

Seeing unbelief in both faces Clare said sharply, "We don't have to be in uniform day and night. I've been to a staff dance at St. Edmund's. I found this man on my way to the Circus to get a taxi."

One of the men was kneeling now beside the unconscious form on the pavement.

"And for goodness' sake, get me a proper tourniquet," Clare went on. "I put on an improvised one but someone undid it while I was up the road in the phone box."

"Someone did *what*?" said the man who was standing, but the other said, "Tourniquet! Quick, George!" and he turned away instantly.

While the experienced men did their work skillfully and fast, Clare got slowly to her feet. Clearly they did not believe a word she had said. Probably they did not even take her word for it that

she was a nurse. Well, she could soon settle that.

"You'll take him to St. Edmund's, won't you?" she said.

"It's the nearest," said the senior of the two men. "Not that it'll make much difference."

"He's not—"

"He's just about had it, miss. You must have seen that for yourself."

She nodded. She felt suddenly too exhausted to speak. By this time the tourniquet was on, held firmly by a broad bandage, with a proper first-aid dressing on the wound. The man was lifted carefully and swiftly onto the stretcher and carried to the ambulance.

"You'd better come along, miss," the St. John man called. "You'll be needed by the police."

Clare was stooping over the pavement. When they lifted the man onto the stretcher, she felt that her part in the attempted rescue was over. Dazed and tired, she collected her shoes and slipped her feet into them. But as she did so, she saw a small object glint from the pavement in the light from the ambulance door. It was the little oblong box.

She picked it up, sticky with drying blood, and, finding a bunch of cotton wool left in the gutter by the ambulance men, wiped it and slipped it into the pocket of her coat.

"Coming," she said, moving quickly to the steps.

The driver was already in his seat. The steps were folded, the doors closed, and they were away, Clare and the other man sitting opposite the stretcher, staring at the grey, still face above the blankets.

There was no delay on their arrival. The driver leaped down and ran inside. Within a very few minutes Dan appeared with a nurse, carrying between them the apparatus for a transfusion.

At sight of Clare, pale, bedraggled, smeared with blood, Dan checked.

"My God, Clare!" he began, but she stopped him, realizing at once what he must be thinking.

"No, Dan. I'm all right. It's this man. A stab wound in his left thigh. I tried to help—"

Seeing the extreme urgency of the case, Dan asked no more but got to work immediately, though with little hope of success. When the transfusion was operating, he looked at the wound. It was not a long one but obviously went deep.

"Wonder where he got that," he muttered, more to himself than

the others. "I'd say he couldn't walk after it or not more than a few steps. Must have been done pretty well on the spot."

"He was lying about the middle of Stone Street," Clare said.

"No one about?"

"Not then. No one. Actually, I didn't see him till I tripped over him."

The senior ambulance man interrupted.

"Can you give me any idea, sir, when you'll be moving him inside?"

Dan looked at the still, grey face on the stretcher. The color had not changed, the breathing was a faint intermittent sigh.

He shook his head.

"I may not be admitting him at all," he said.

The man beckoned to his mate, and the two of them went off to the night canteen to find a cup of tea and wait until they were called back.

Almost at once a police patrol car drove into the casualty bay. Two uniformed officers got out and went into the hospital. In a few seconds they came out again, moving to the ambulance.

The nurse in attendance on Dan said, "It's the police, sir."

"Tell them to wait," he answered crossly. "I'm busy."

The girl said nothing. The officers were near enough to hear. In fact they had heard, and one of them, looking into the ambulance without climbing the steps, understood the doctor's abruptness.

"Very good, sir," he said. "I don't want to interfere with your treatment, but if I might speak to this young lady—I'm Sergeant Phillips. Flying Squad. Scotland Yard."

He indicated the nurse at Dan's side.

"Why?" Dan asked coldly.

"I understand she found the, er, casualty and phoned us and the ambulance."

"No," said Dan. "She didn't."

Clare stared at him. She could not understand his manner, which was unhelpful if not definitely rude.

"Not this nurse?" said Sergeant Phillips mildly. He knew that doctors were often touchy, particularly in the middle of the night. Then, as Dan and the nurse moved, he saw Clare beyond them and thought he understood.

"You, miss," he said in a changed voice. "Were you with this man when it happened?"

Clare was beginning, "I found him. Is that what you mean?"

"Of course she wasn't with him, in whatever roughhouse he got himself mixed up with," Dan said furiously. "Nurse Clare Marshall was here in this hospital up to about an hour ago. Less than an hour."

"I'm Nurse Marshall," said Clare. "I phoned you."

Sergeant Phillips' eyebrows went up, but he only said, "Then perhaps I could have a word with you, nurse, about the circumstances—"

"Not in here," said Dan brusquely. "Sister in Casualty will show you a place to natter in."

"Dan!" Clare was beginning to be angry herself. Sergeant Phillips looked from one young flushed face to the other. The nurse beside Dan also looked, her eyes sparkling. The rumors had been correct, then. There was something between them, and they must have had a row that evening; at the dance, most likely. She'd have a lovely tale to tell when she went off duty.

Clare dropped her eyes. She did not understand why Dan was behaving like this, and she felt both hurt and bewildered. But it had nothing to do with her duty, which was to tell the police what she knew and what she had done.

"I'll come, of course," she said quietly to Sergeant Phillips, moving towards the ambulance door. Dan's back was towards her as she passed him, but she heard him murmur, very softly, "Don't leave the place till I've seen you."

She made no answer but climbed down the steps and turned towards the lighted door of the big casualty department, followed by the two police officers.

The wide waiting hall was, to lay eyes, surprisingly crowded, but to the staff it was just another working night. St. Edmund's, in common with the other big London hospitals, served a wide industrial area, with factories and building sites where night shifts were a permanent feature. From these a steady stream of minor cuts, bruises, and ailments trooped up to St. Edmund's for relief, together with a few more serious injuries such as fractures and burns. Besides all this, the usual quota of road accidents brought their toll of cracked skulls, broken limbs, and the inevitable shock.

Most of the waiting visitors, absorbed in their own condition, did not even notice Clare and her escort, though the former's appearance was striking enough and unpleasantly so. Police at the hospital were a common enough sight, especially the mobile kind. They usually appeared on the tail of road accidents, eager to take state-

ments before accurate memory faded. But a walking victim in a dance dress bespattered with blood, a character apparently in good health and escorted by two burly figures in dark blue, was not usual, and those less preoccupied with their own sufferings did turn their heads to stare at her. Two of them, immediately after catching sight of her, turned eagerly to one another, whispering together with bent heads as the group passed, led by Sister Meadows, who was in charge of the department.

"Door in the corner," muttered one of the men. "Know where it goes?"

"Just come out of there," the other replied. "Sort of an examination room, like. Cubicles and that."

"Curtained?"

"Yeah. I bin 'ere before. They shoves yer into one o' them and forgets all about yer."

A smile widened the thin face of the other man.

"You've got to go in there and put yourself anywhere you can hear what that girl says. Name and address is what you want. Get that and slip out again. Play it quiet and pathetic, if anyone spots you. You feel that bad, or you don't feel that bad. Right?"

"Right," said the other. "It'd look a darned sight better if you was to come in with me. Tell the nurse I've got to lay down."

"Me go in with those rozzers? Are you nuts?"

The smaller man muttered something uncomplimentary, and the thin face so near his own tightened while the eyes took on an evil gleam.

"You oughter be careful," their owner warned, "very careful how you treat my feelings. I'm sensitive, see?"

"Okay, okay," said the other. He got up quickly, only to be pulled back again by his menacing friend.

"You're ill, you dump," the fierce whisper came again. "Act like you was bad in your stomach. That'll give you all the excuses you need. I'll be in the car back of here. Stanley Crescent. The boss said thirty minutes at the outside. You got fifteen left. Get a move on."

He sat back, watching his anxious and thoroughly unwilling colleague make his way slowly to the door in the corner and very quietly and unobtrusively pass through it. Then he rose himself, and also very quietly and unobtrusively, looking at no one and drawing no attention to himself, he left the hospital by the casualty entrance, crossed the courtyard, skirting the ambulance where



Dan still worked, but without hope now, to save a life, and walked quietly away. When he reached the car, parked in Stanley Crescent, he went past it, then turning into a small side alley, stood still, waiting in darkness for his friend to rejoin him.

Sister Meadows took the two police officers and Clare into the last cubicle of the row, found some chairs and a small table for them, and, pulling the curtain across the end of the cubicle, remarked, "No one can see you in here. If you talk quietly, no one can hear you, either."

Her expression was not cordial. She knew Clare and hitherto had liked her well enough. But like Dan, she resented the girl's leaving the hospital for private nursing, though her feeling arose from a quite different cause. Clare had done well all through her training. She had won several prizes in the course of it and had been marked down early as the future Sister of a ward, if not for higher posts still. Too many girls left after qualifying for one reason or another, many to get married. That Clare should have done so simply to make more money appeared to Sister Meadows, a dedicated soul, to be quite disgraceful. Well, the girl was paying for it. If she had been living in the Nurses' Home, she would not have got herself into this pickle. Sister Meadows knew none of the details, but she took a suspicious view of life in general, and many fantastic ideas passed through her mind as she left Clare to tell her story.

A small man, clutching his stomach, stood in her path at the other end of the room.

"What d'you want?" she said, sharply. "Why have you come in here?"

He gave her a cringing smile.

"Nurse said to go in 'ere and lie down," he said apologetically. "They'll come and examine me, she said."

"In here," Sister answered, pulling back the curtain of the first cubicle. "Just take your jacket off and your shoes and loosen your other things. Then get up on the couch. What's the trouble? Not an accident of any kind, was it?"

"No, Sister," he said. "It's my stummick. Bad pain. Come on all at a sudden. Ooh!"

He doubled up, overdoing it badly, for Sister at once helped him into the cubicle, took his jacket, got him on the couch, covered him with a blanket, and saying, "I'll get the doctor at once," hurried



away. No time to lose, he thought, slipping off the couch the moment he heard the door close behind her. He took his shoes in his hand and his jacket over his arm and, crawling under the curtains of the cubicle, made his silent way along the row to where he heard the murmur of voices.

He was just in time, and his luck held. All the curtains of this last cubicle but one were closed; otherwise he would inevitably have been seen by a new arrival, who at that moment came across the room.

He felt cold sweat on his forehead. Was this the doctor, looking for him? No, it was worse in a way. But in a way it saved him.

"Inspector Stevens," the newcomer introduced himself to Clare. "I come from divisional headquarters. That's the local place, not Scotland Yard, like these two," he explained, seeing her bewilderment and feeling sorry for her obvious distress. "I've come along because I think you can help us with a case we've been dealing with this evening. You are Miss—"

"Marshall," said Clare, wondering how often this routine would be repeated. "Clare Marshall, and I'm living at the Nursing Association hostel at—"

She repeated the address she had already given and waited. In the cubicle next door the listener had already begun to crawl back the way he had come. He knew what he had been sent to find out. He knew something more besides. That the man outside in the ambulance had already been tied in with the police raid on the club in Quarry Place. This was serious. He'd got to get back quickly. The boss would know what to do, but he'd got to get back to him just as fast as he could make it.

Again he was lucky. Slipping out of his cubicle, not daring to leave by the door of the room, he crept down an open, narrow, dark passage at the side of one of the cubicles, which he guessed would lead to the lavatories.

He was right, and he found to his joy that the passage carried on into another room full of cubicles, identical with the one he had left. The lavatories served both rooms, and this second one was quite empty.

Very cautiously he opened the door at the side. As he had guessed, it led out into the waiting hall opposite the door of the other room. He straightened himself, went quietly through as unnoticed as his friend, and was soon walking steadily but not too fast into Stanley Crescent.

A shadow came from the alleyway. The two men met at the car, got in, and drove away.

"Get what I said?" the thin-faced man asked.

"Got a mouthful," the other answered. "She don't know it, but she knows a sight too much, that girl. A darned sight too much."

Quite ignorant of the fact that they had been overheard, Inspector Stevens and Sergeant Phillips went carefully through every detail of Clare's actions from the time she stumbled over the prostrate body to the moment she left the telephone box after phoning for help.

"You say you couldn't see this new arrival on the scene?"

"No. I thought at first it was the wounded man sitting up."

"Why did you think he was capable of that? You have told us you thought his pulse was very weak."

Clare flushed. No one that evening had given her the least credit for her efforts to help.

"I knew my tourniquet had stopped the bleeding," she said. "I thought he might be improving."

"I see. And then?"

"This other person must have seen me coming back."

"Heard, you mean?"

Clare shook her head.

"He wouldn't have heard my footsteps. I slipped my shoes off to run up to the phone box more easily."

She pushed forward her foot in its high-heeled evening slipper. For the first time the inspector gave her a friendly smile.

"So you were part of the way back when this other character noticed you. Wouldn't he have seen those shoes of yours near the wounded man?"

"He might have. Yes. Anyway, it was just when I could see it was someone else crouching over the patient that he looked up and saw me. I still couldn't see the face distinctly. It just looked a white blob."

"And then?"

"He jumped up and ran away. I shouted, but he didn't stop."

"You say 'he' all the time. Are you sure it was a man?"

"No," said Clare, slowly, "not absolutely sure. So many women wear trousers, and he had a longish overcoat on. But he took very long strides and the shoes looked big. I just thought it was a man."

"Right. And then?"

Her voice rose indignantly as she answered.

"He'd undone my stole—my bandage. The tourniquet was useless. I tried to stop the bleeding again by manual pressure. Then the ambulance came and they had the proper things for a tourniquet and they got it fixed very quickly. Much better than I'd been able to do with—"

She broke off. She had been fumbling in the pocket of her coat for the little oblong box in order to show them that she had indeed done her best and might have been more successful if her work had not been ruined. But before she could get it out, the door of the room opened and Dan strode in. His face was white and exhausted and angry. He paid no attention to Clare but spoke to Inspector Stevens.

"He's dead," he said. "D'you want to see him, or shall I tell the ambulance to take him on to the mortuary?"

The three officers got to their feet.

"He hasn't been identified, has he?" the inspector asked.

"Not by me," Dan answered with an irritated note in his voice.

"Of course not. Too busy trying to save his life, doctor. I know that."

"There was practically nothing in his pockets," Clare said, breaking in. "I was looking for something to use as a tourniquet. There was nothing except a pen and—"

"The ambulance chaps may have something," said Dan, interrupting her. Neither he nor the police paid any attention to what she had been trying to say.

"I'll come right away," the inspector said.

He walked off and Clare heard him say something about phoning the pathologist. And then Sister Meadows was beside her saying, "It's all over, I'm afraid. Bad luck you got mixed up in it."

"I did what I could," Clare said. She was shaking now, from shock, tired and cold and profoundly unhappy. "I did try," she repeated.

"Of course you did," Sister assured her. "You'd better get home now."

Clare nodded.

"I'll get hold of a taxi for you," Sister said, but as she moved with the girl to the door, Sergeant Phillips appeared again.

"We'll run you back, nurse," he said. "Can't have you out on your own at this hour."

Mechanically Clare looked at her watch. Half-past one. No wonder she felt dead on her feet.

With a brief goodnight to Sister she walked with the sergeant to the police car still parked in the casualty bay. The ambulance had gone. Dan was nowhere to be seen, nor the divisional inspector.

During the drive Clare said, "Don't you know who he was or anything? Was it a fight?"

Sergeant Phillips was silent for a long time, then he said, "In the papers tomorrow you'll see a paragraph on a row at a nightclub in Quarry Place. That's about half a mile from Stone Street. There were several arrests but no casualties in the club itself."

"Was this man there?"

"That's one of the things we'll have to find out," said Sergeant Phillips. "He could've been. But not necessarily."

Clare did not ask any more questions. She knew they would not be answered. Besides, her thoughts now were with Dan. He had been brusque and strange and had made no attempt to see her when his work on the wounded man had failed and he could do no more. Perhaps he had to see another urgent case. Yet he had asked her not to go until he had spoken to her. He could have sent her a message. What did he expect her to do? Anyway, these officers had told her to go with them.

The earlier happiness of that evening was now destroyed, she felt. Probably Dan was beginning to regret having been carried away. In her deeply depressed mood and profound emotional reaction, she was ready to believe that he did not really love her, had never really loved her. The future looked bleak.

Arrived at the Association hostel's front door, Sergeant Phillips escorted Clare in and stood beside her as she spoke to the night receptionist at the desk, sitting ready to deal with all calls.

Sergeant Phillips appeared to be satisfied with the brief conversation between the two girls. He wanted to see if I was genuine, Clare thought. The sergeant asked the receptionist a few brief questions about the organization and then turned to Clare.

"We shall want to keep in touch with you, Miss Marshall," he said.

"This is my permanent address," she answered, "and I'm not on a case at present."

"Fair enough," Sergeant Phillips said. "You'll be hearing from us."

When he had gone, the receptionist turned to Clare.

"Sister Hood wants to see you," she said. "She didn't tell me what it was for, but there've been two emergency calls this evening."

"Thank you, Molly."

Clare went towards Sister's office at the other side of the hall. As she did so she felt for her handkerchief. She had been on the verge of tears ever since she left the hospital. She did not want Sister to notice anything.

As she fumbled in the pocket of her coat, her fingers closed round the oblong box. She had not given it a thought since the moment Dan had interrupted her interview with the police to announce the unknown man's death.

Well, it couldn't be helped. There was always tomorrow. Tomorrow she would hand the thing over to Sergeant Phillips, or the inspector, and perhaps then they would understand that she had done her best and not such a bad best at that.

## II

Sister Hood was an elderly woman whose heavy build had increased with the years until now, at sixty-seven, she found it a labor to move about at all; to hurry was impossible. So she had given up active nursing and, since she had no objection to permanent night work, was filling a much needed and most useful place at the Nursing Association headquarters and hostel. Harassed G.P.'s and hysterical relatives found her quiet, professional manner and deep fruity voice very soothing in the middle of the night when a nurse was required immediately to bring order and comfort to a home suddenly stricken, where the victim would not or could not be admitted at once to a hospital or nursing home. Sister Hood knew exactly what was needed in each case. She had spent a lifetime nursing in the homes of the wealthy and unwise. She understood their peculiar, often arrogant attitude to disease; their utter indignant helplessness in the face of something unpleasant that could not immediately be removed by the use of money. By supplying a young, well-trained, efficient nurse, she could help to restore this lost sense of power. The Association's fees were very high and all of the nurses highly competent. Moreover, Sister Hood was ready to satisfy, if she could, any individual wishes expressed by doctor or patient. Which was the reason for her demand to see Clare Marshall the minute she got back to the hostel.

"Molly said you wanted to speak to me," Clare said wearily, after knocking on Sister Hood's office door and receiving her deep-voiced permission to enter.

"Gracious heavens," exclaimed Sister, looking at the wan apparition that came slowly into the room. "What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

Clare explained in as few words as possible. Sister Hood pressed the bell on her desk. When Molly came in she said, "Coffee for Nurse Marshall, at once, in here."

"Yes, Sister," the girl said and disappeared.

"But I don't want any coffee," Clare protested. "Ovaltine would be more to the point. Actually I don't want anything except a hot bath and my bed."

"I wish I could let you have it," said Sister, kindly. "The bed, I mean. You can have the bath. You look as if you need it. But there's a case—"

"Not for me!" Clare cried indignantly. "Not straight on top of this!"

"I'm sorry," Sister told her, "but it's you or nobody. And you know our rules. Any preference as to which nurse must be met, if physically possible. You aren't on another case. And you're here now."

Clare was young, with all the reserves of spirit and energy that belong to the young, strong, and healthy. Moreover, she was intensely interested in her chosen profession and avid for experience. At the same time, she was desperately tired and depressed, and her self-confidence had been sadly bruised.

"It's medical," said Sister Hood. "A country home for neurotics where—"

"Oh no," Clare exclaimed.

"Wait a bit: One of their regulars went off tonight with an acute appendix, and they can't manage without a full staff. They asked for you by name."

"Why? I mean, how did they know my name?"

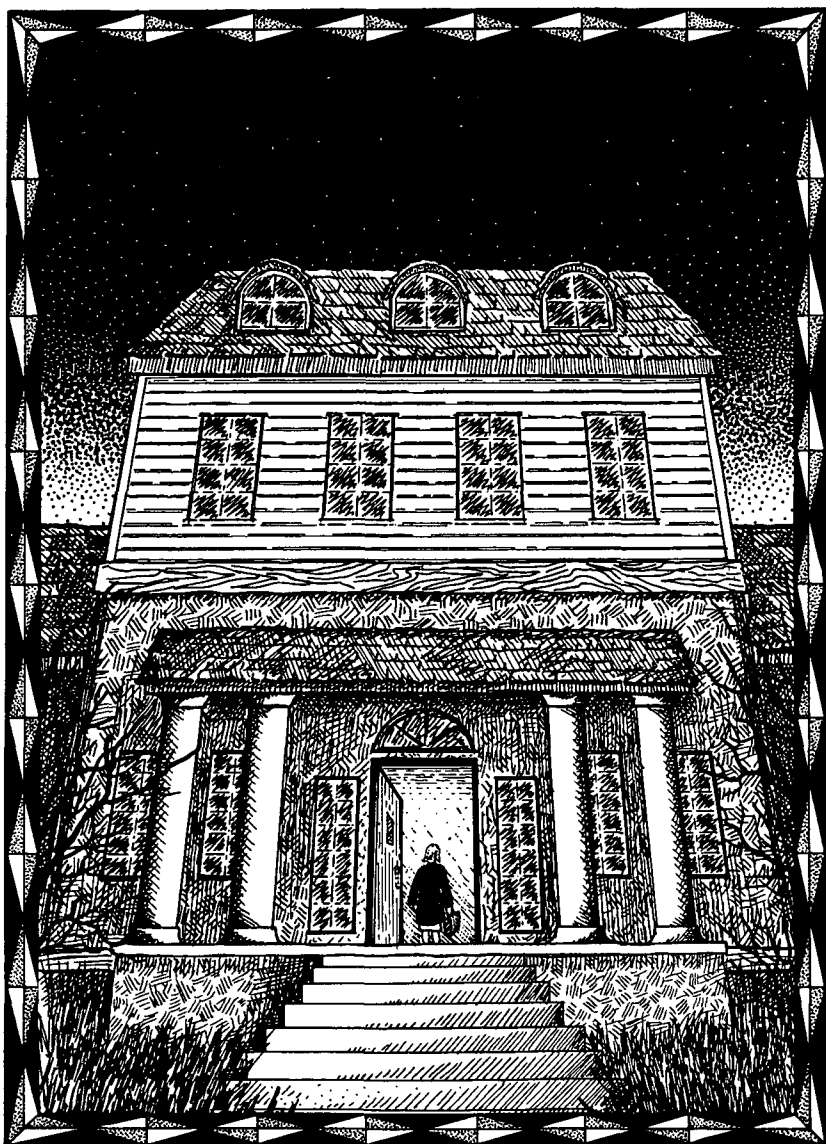
"Recommended by Clarendon House convalescent home."

"That place! I was only there three weeks. I didn't think I'd made any impression at all. It was deadly dull, but the food was marvelous. The patients were paying the earth, and there wasn't much the matter with any of them."

"That would be highly desirable at a convalescent home," said Sister Hood with a faint smile.

"It sounds just like the place that wants me now. But I still don't see who—"

"A Lady Ede mentioned you. She liked you very much."



WHERE WAS EVERYONE, CLARE WONDERED. SHE LOOKED ABOUT QUICKLY.  
AN EMPTY HALL . . .

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Clare laughed.

"Did she, indeed? She nearly bit my head off every time I answered her bell. It rang practically every five minutes."

"But you did answer it?"

"I suppose so. If I was on her landing. They switched us round a good deal. To prevent us hitting the real terrors on the head, I expect."

"Well, never mind. She liked you, and she must have a friend at this place that wants you now. Or else they've been asking round."

"Asking round, most likely," said Clare. "Lady Ede doesn't have friends. Only acquaintances and enemies."

The coffee was brought in, and Clare began to sip it gratefully. If she had to go out straight away on another case, she needed something to keep her awake, she decided. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing to go away at once. Might shake Dan up. Or finish the thing before it had really begun. She knew in her heart that it would not be so simple for herself. His image filled the whole background of her mind even as she argued the merits of the new assignment. She knew the image would remain for a long time; a fixed object of desire.

The telephone bell rang. Sister Hood picked up the receiver. Molly's voice said, "They've called again from Granville House, Sister."

"Put them through."

Covering the mouthpiece with her hand, Sister Hood said, "Here they are again."

She listened. Presently she said, "Yes, I have her here now." She paused, looking across her desk at Clare. The girl did look quite exhausted, she thought. For a second she hesitated; not on Clare's account—a nurse must go on till she drops—but for the reputation of the Association. Their nurses never broke down, never had, never would.

Apparently the voice at the other end grew sharp, insistent.

"Will you go?" Sister asked Clare, surprised at herself for her own uncertainty. The girl nodded. "Nurse Marshall will be able to come," she said into the receiver. "Can you give us directions—railway station—"

There was a long spate of words at the other end. Finally the call ended, and Sister Hood put down the receiver.

"They are sending a car here for you," she said. "Be ready in half an hour."



"Yes, Sister," Clare answered. She got to her feet stiffly and walked out of the room.

A hot bath and the developing effect of the coffee revived her to some extent, but she was still desperately tired and weighed down by a heavy sadness whenever her thoughts turned to Dan, which happened every few minutes. But her training helped her. There was no question of giving in to either her feelings or bodily discomfort. She put on her uniform with automatic speed and neatness and stuffed her night things, cosmetics, and sponge bag into the suitcase that always stood ready at her bedside, packed with essential medical equipment. Then she stood looking about her, trying to concentrate on the job in hand and decide if she had packed everything she needed.

Her soiled evening clothes lay on the bed. She looked at them with disgust and felt tears pricking her eyes. The dress might well be ruined. Not only was it bloodstained and dirty, but there was a ragged tear near the hem in one place. Perhaps she had caught it in the ambulance door or pulled it getting up from kneeling on the pavement. She had been much too intent upon the wounded man to notice anything else at the time.

She bundled up the dress and pushed it into the large paper bag that had held it when she took it from the shop where she had bought it only a week ago. Poor dress. It had been a brief extravagance, indulged in solely for the hospital dance and Dan. A waste of everything, she thought bitterly. But she found a pencil and a bit of paper and wrote, "For the cleaner, please," on it. They would find it when they did her room. They were considerate over this sort of thing.

Having settled the fate of the dress, she put her evening shoes in the wall cupboard. They seemed to have suffered less than the dress. The stockings went into the wastepaper basket. The coat—

She plunged her hand into the pocket. The little oblong box was still there. Furious with herself now for having forgotten to give it to the police, she stared at it, wondering how to rectify her mistake.

It was made of silver, she saw, with a hinged lid that bore a coat of arms in relief. A snuffbox, obviously.

She pulled open the lid, but instead of the brownish substance she expected to find, the box was nearly empty, with a few grains of white powder clinging to the corners and inside the hinge.

Well, anyway, she decided, Sister Hood must give it to Sergeant

Phillips. She would take it down to her straight away.

While she was getting out an envelope from her writing case in which to put the snuffbox, her room telephone bell began to ring. Sister Hood's voice said, "Are you ready? The car has come for you. The chauffeur is here in the hall. He says he thinks it's urgent."

"Coming," Clare answered briefly.

The envelope was in her hand. She pushed the snuffbox into it, snatched up her suitcase and handbag, and ran down to the hall.

A man in chauffeur's uniform was waiting there. He came forward to take her bag.

"I must just see Sister," she said breathlessly, meaning to go into the office. But at that moment Sister Hood came out.

The man, holding the suitcase, was waiting for her. Clare decided that it would hardly do to ask Sister to give her envelope to the police. The chauffeur would be sure to report such a startling request to his employers, and the Association might suffer. So she handed over the envelope, saying merely, "Could you keep this for me, Sister? I'll be writing," and, after exchanging goodbyes, followed the man out to the car.

She was shown to a large, very comfortable back seat and almost at once fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The noise of doors opening and shutting and voices speaking loudly and rapidly drew her up with some violence from the depths. She felt confused and numb. Her head ached, her mouth was dry. When she moved her head, trying to lift it from the cushion of the car, a searing pain shot down her neck, making her gasp. She realized that she had crumpled up in her sleep and her head had fallen sideways, and now she was stiff all over.

While she was still moving her head from side to side, trying to shake off both the stiffness and the woolliness in her brain, the door of the car was opened, a light came on over her head, and she found herself staring at the chauffeur, who was looking at her with a grin on his face.

"Time to wake up, miss," he said. "Out like a light, wasn't you?"

She tried to smile and, as he still held the door open, moved across to it and forced her unwilling body to leave the car. Once on her feet with the cold night air blowing into her face, she began to feel better.

The house before which the car had halted seemed to be large and set in trees. There was no sign of a road where she stood, so she concluded that they had come up a drive, though she could not

see clearly how it lay. At any rate, the car stood in a cleared space among trees, and underfoot there seemed to be gravel.

She followed the chauffeur, who was now alone, to the open door of the house. Two steps led up to a pillared porch and, beyond, a fine broad door with a charming fanlight. Late eighteenth century, Clare thought as she walked through into a well proportioned hall.

The chauffeur put her suitcase down near a chair. Where was everyone, Clare wondered, remembering the voices that had awakened her. She looked about quickly. An empty hall, an empty, wide, and graceful staircase. Then suddenly a clatter of heels and from behind the staircase a woman came hurrying.

She was dressed in a white overall over a dark skirt of some thin material. Not a nurse, Clare decided, with those shoes, stiletto heels and very pointed toes. Her face had an anxious look as she rounded the corner, but when she saw Clare, she hurried forward with a very bright smile.

"So you've arrived, nurse. We're so glad. Nurse—Marshall, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Clare. "And this is Granville House?"

The woman nodded. She did not seem to know what to do next. She must be one of the domestic staff, Clare thought, but all the same, she ought to know how to introduce a new nurse to the sister in charge of the patients, or at any rate show her to her room.

"Perhaps you will have my bag taken up to my room," she suggested, "and then I had better see Sister or the staff nurse or whoever is on duty."

The woman looked blank for a moment, and Clare had a queer feeling that she had not listened to a single word she had said to her but was occupied with some problem in her own mind. But she must have noticed the change in Clare's expression, for she suddenly smiled at her again and said, "Dr. Freeman would like to see you straight away. Follow me, please."

Leaving her suitcase but taking her handbag with her, Clare moved after the woman in the overall to a door at the back of the hall. She passed a handsome clock standing on a wide table, and looking at it as she went by, she saw to her astonishment that the time was half-past five. Quickly glancing at her own watch, she found this confirmed. So she had spent over three hours on the journey. She had slept for more than three hours.

The woman knocked at the door and waited. A man's voice answered.

"Go in," the woman said. "Dr. Freeman is waiting for you."

Clare passed in and heard the door shut behind her.

The room was not large. It might originally have been a study, or perhaps a morning room for the lady of the house. The furniture was undistinguished but good, of a solid Victorian type. To Clare's surprise it looked singularly uncared for, lacking polish of any kind, the brasses brown or green with damp and neglect, the wood dull and faded. The desk at which Dr. Freeman sat had an obvious film of dust wherever his papers were not lying.

She took all this in briefly with a little shock of surprise, wondering what sort of establishment this was where the domestic arrangements and competence were so lacking. But her attention was at once taken from her surroundings by the impact of Dr. Freeman himself, whose eyes had fixed upon her the moment she entered the room and remained there as she walked slowly forward to the desk.

He was a goodlooking, youngish man, she noticed, with very dark hair and pale skin, suggesting Celtish blood. But his eyes, which still held hers, were the most remarkable thing about him, for they were of a very light brown, almost amber color, she decided. When the light from his desk lamp caught them, they shone momentarily with a pale, blank, cold light. When he moved, she saw the intelligence, equally cold but sharply personal, fixed on her. Certainly for a doctor running a nursing home he was unusually and definitely disturbing.

He spoke before she had quite reached the broad table he was using as a desk, not getting up but stretching out a hand towards her. She moved up to take it, flushing a little at this unconventional welcome.

"It's terribly good of you to fill the gap so promptly," he said. It was a pleasant voice, and the smile that followed the words had considerable charm. Clare felt reassured.

"We really are in a bit of a jam," he continued, still watching her closely. "That was Miss Hunter, my housekeeper, who met you in the hall. At the moment her domestic staff is cut by half and my nursing staff is down to one. Devastating."

He spread his hands in a gesture that reminded Clare of her last brief Mediterranean holiday. She felt it was time she said something herself.

"How many patients have you?" she asked.

It seemed to her a very reasonable question, but she saw a shade

of annoyance flash across Dr. Freeman's handsome face, instantly replaced by another charming smile.

"When we're full, we can manage fourteen," he said, "but I'm happy to say we have sent out several cases cured in the last few weeks and our numbers are down to eight."

It was on the tip of Clare's tongue to say, "Then why do you need more than one nurse?" Dr. Freeman evidently read her mind, for he went on, "We need you as a special—for one particularly bad case. She has been with me a fortnight. She was very disturbed when she came in, and I have her under fairly deep sedation."

"I see," Clare said. "You want me to take over straight away?"

Dr. Freeman jumped to his feet. "If you're not too tired," he said, adding after a noticeable pause, "from your journey."

"No, I'm not tired now," Clare assured him. She did not think it necessary to add that she had slept all the way from London.

Dr. Freeman walked out of the room ahead of her, leaving her to deal with the door. When she had closed it, she saw he had already reached the foot of the stairs. Her suitcase was still standing beside the chair in the hall.

"Some of my things are in my case," she said. "I thought they—Miss Hunter, that is—would have had it sent up to my room."

Dr. Freeman paused, looking down at her over the banisters.

"You'll find everything you need in your patient's room," he said. "But I'll see that Miss Hunter deals with your case."

Clare wanted to insist upon having her own things with her and was quite prepared to take up the case herself, but something about Dr. Freeman subdued argument or even mild protest and she turned meekly up the stairs, leaving the suitcase where it was.

The patient's room was on the first floor, a large, beautiful room as well cared for as the doctor's office had been neglected and scruffy.

On the bed lay a woman with a thin, lined face. Her grey curls, tangled and unbrushed, framed the worn features in an untidy bush. Her face was very pale, the lips blue. Her breathing was slow and shallow.

Clare moved quickly to the bedside, lifting the limp hand and feeling for the pulse. The woman did not move at all. She was deeply unconscious.

For the second time that night Clare was shocked by the feeble flutter under her fingers. She lifted an eyelid. The pupil was barely

visible; a mere dot in the grey-blue iris. This was another shock. They had been piling it on, all right. Dangerously so, she thought.

She looked up. Dr. Freeman was standing on the other side of the bed with his strange light brown eyes again fixed upon her.

"She seems to be very deeply under," Clare said. The words sounded ridiculous. Why didn't she say at once that she thought the patient was dangerously drugged?

Dr. Freeman calmly felt the pulse himself.

"Nice and quiet," he said. "She was uncontrollable—this morning. You won't have any trouble with her for the next few hours."

While he was speaking, Clare was staring down at the woman on the bed. She had realized that the face was vaguely familiar, but try as she would, she could not place her.

"I—I seem to have seen her before," she said, "only I can't think where."

She was still looking at the patient and so did not see the sudden flash of anger that again swept over Dr. Freeman's face, nor the sudden movement of his hand towards his hip.

"I wonder if she ever came to visit Lady Ede while I was looking after her," Clare went on. "I don't remember all her visitors. People look so different when they're ill and in bed. But it was Lady Ede who gave my name, wasn't it?"

Dr. Freeman's tense pose relaxed, and he met Clare's uplifted eyes with his very attractive smile.

"That must be it," he said. "Lady Ede, of course."

He continued to look at her. Clare tried to keep her professional manner quietly undisturbed, but she could not help her color's changing under this frankly admiring gaze.

"What's your name?" he asked at length, in a soft voice quite different from anything she had heard before.

The question was so surprising in view of all the telephone messages that Clare laughed. This was not the expected response and Dr. Freeman frowned suddenly, which helped her still more.

"Didn't they tell you?" she said. "Marshall. I thought that was how Lady Ede—"

"Of course. Of course," he said, seeing his mistake and instantly correcting it. "Naturally I meant your first name. This is a friendly establishment. It helps the patients if we are not too formal."

"Oh, that. Clare," she answered indifferently.

"Mine is Charles," he answered, and he turned on his heel and went out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Clare moved to the bed. There was a good deal she did not understand and did not like about this curious nursing home, but she felt sure that Charles Freeman was a genuine, if possibly cranky, doctor, and there was no doubt at all about the condition of her patient. Turning back the bedclothes, she examined her gently and thoroughly. Then she pulled up the sheet and blankets again and stood looking down.

Perhaps this *was* a mental case of some sort, a woman who had been in a maniacal frenzy. There were bruises in plenty on her body, which might have been self-inflicted or caused by the handling necessary to restrain her. Her hair was matted and tangled, her skin far from clean. But the hypodermic needlemarks on her left arm and both thighs? Could so many and such clearly old scars have all been treatments? Clare was sure they were not. She had had quite a lot of experience with dope addicts in the course of her private nursing, and she was certain in her own mind that this woman was one, and had been addicted for some considerable time, possibly years.

Having nothing better to do, she set about cleaning up her patient. It could do her no harm if she handled her gently and avoided too much movement, and it might make her feel much more comfortable when she came round from the injection.

The room she was in had a bathroom attached. Clare was pleased to find there was hot water in the tap, though the towels were not very fresh and the bath had a marked soap rim showing it had not been cleaned out for some time. The domestic crisis must be quite as bad as Dr. Freeman had suggested, she thought.

But she was able to carry out her plan for making the patient more comfortable and was pleased to notice when she had finished that her pulse had improved and her color with it. Evidently the effects of the drug were passing off. Perhaps in another hour or two she would be able to give some account of herself.

Again Clare went round the room, this time to see if there were any provision for feeding her patient. There was nothing on either the bedside table or another table under one of the two windows. But in a cupboard that formed part of a large old fashioned wardrobe she found a bottle of milk, a packet of biscuits, a piece of old, hard cheese, and a tin of drinking chocolate. On the hearth there were an electric fire, an electric kettle, and a hot plate. A small saucepan stood beside the latter. The fire was on, but the plug that served it had a three-way switch that could take the other



apparatus. Clare spent some time making these investigations and deciding that she need not go down for more stores at present. The milk seemed to be fresh, and the biscuits would obviously not be needed.

When she had finished, she looked at her watch and was surprised to find the time was already nearly eight in the morning. The night had gone by very quickly. She went to the windows to draw back the heavy curtains. Outside, the cold November dawn laid a grey hand on the gold and bronze of late autumn leaves, but there was no mist and the rolling hills, their hollows filled with clumps of trees, marched away into the distance.

But not to the horizon. In a gap Clare saw, to her immense surprise, a straight grey line, a flat grey surface below. It was quite unmistakable. She was looking at the sea, and that sea could not be more than five or six miles from where she stood.

She left the window and sat down near the fire, holding out her hands to it to warm the sudden chill that had struck through her whole body. For the address she had left at the hostel—the address where everyone expected her to be, where the police were to keep their contact with her, where Dan, if he still wanted her, would find her—was in Berkshire, and that county was not, any part of it, within six miles or so of the open sea.

She jumped up again and went to the window once more. The light was increasing; a faint blue showed directly above, and away to the left the grey was turning to white. That was where the sun lay still hidden, so straight ahead she must be looking south. Could that line, that flat grey-blue surface, be a lake, or the river Thames? Her geography was sketchy, but she felt doubtful of this. And then she saw a faint smoke line above a small black smudge and her first conclusion was proved. There was a ship out there, far away. It was no lake, no river that she was looking at.

She went back to the fire once more, determined to think the thing out calmly. She had arrived at this place, this Granville House, at half-past five, having left London a little after two. Why had she not worked this out before? The car had spent over three hours on the journey, so she must have come at least a hundred miles. She could not therefore be in Berkshire, but a great deal farther from London. Where was she? Why had she slept too soon, before she had noticed how they left town? Was she on the east coast or the south? Not the east, for she had already seen that the water lay straight ahead of her view from the window, and that



the sun would rise to the left of it. On the east coast the sun would have been ahead or to the right. A hundred miles from London. Anywhere from Kent to—where? Where was she? Why had they said Berkshire and brought her to this unknown place?

A murmur began to fill the room, a babble that grew in intensity. Clare hurried to the bedside, discarding her personal bewilderment and fear in her concern for her patient.

The woman stopped trying to speak and gazed up at her, at first with terror in her eyes.

"I'm Nurse Marshall," the girl said gently and slowly. "I'm to look after you until you are better."

The frightened look faded slowly. A trembling hand came out to take Clare's.

"I'll get you a hot drink," Clare said. "Then you'll feel better."

She was surprised that the woman had recovered so much after being so deeply unconscious, but it confirmed her view that she was an addict. The immediate effect of what must have been a very heavy dose was severe, but her body's acquired tolerance had dealt with it swiftly.

Clare set about heating some milk and added the powdered chocolate. There was no cup in the room, but a plastic beaker in the bathroom served well enough.

The woman in the bed was too weak and still too dazed to sit up, but with Clare supporting her, she first sipped and later drank avidly until the cup was empty. Clare settled her back on her pillows and tucked her up. Then she took the beaker and saucepan away to wash them up in the bathroom. When she went back to the bedside, the patient was asleep, her breathing steady and normal, a faint pink flush on her wasted cheeks, her dry lips no longer looking quite so cracked and rough as when Clare had first seen her.

A few minutes later the door opened and a youngish woman in nurse's uniform came in. She was carrying a small tray covered with a cloth. Clare guessed that it held another injection and was about to speak when the other said, "Good morning. You are the chief nurse—Marshall—aren't you?"

"Yes," Clare said. "I got here early this morning. How is—where is—"

She was going to ask how the nurse with the emergency appendix was getting on, but at once she decided to ask, first, where this house was and why she had been given a wrong address. But she did not have a chance to finish either of her questions properly.

"My name is Wilcox," the other nurse said. "Kay Wilcox. You must be whacked. I'll take you along to your room. They've put your things up there."

She walked up to the bed and looked down at the patient.

"Quiet enough at the moment," she said.

"She's asleep," Clare answered. She would have added that she had washed and tended and fed her, but Nurse Wilcox had already turned away and was showing her out to the landing.

Her room was up another flight of stairs and was small compared with the one she had just left. She was relieved to see her suitcase lying on a chair.

"You must be famished," Nurse Wilcox said. "I must get back to that woman. But if you go downstairs you'll find Daisy—Miss Hunter—and she'll have a meal for you. Breakfast, I expect. I've just had mine. You ought to have something before you turn in."

"Of course," said Clare coldly. Nurse Wilcox did not speak at all in the way she should. Calling her patient "that woman"!

"What is her name?" she asked.

"Hunter. Miss Hunter."

"I don't mean the housekeeper. I mean the patient."

"Oh, her?" said Nurse Wilcox. She did not answer the question, but moved about the room vaguely. "I think you've got everything you want," she said. "We're a bit disorganized on the domestic side, so you'll have to scrounge round for yourself. See you at eight tonight when you take over."

She was gone. Clare picked up her handbag and hurried after her, but there was no one in sight on the landing outside and no steps sounded anywhere. Either she had run quickly and quietly down the stairs, or she had gone into another room on the same landing.

Clare walked slowly downstairs. There was one thing she must do at once. Find a telephone and tell them at the hostel that her address was wrong. Perhaps that would not be much help, but she decided not to try to find out the correct address before phoning. She wanted no one in this strange place to know why she was ringing up before she made this basic fact clear to them at the Association. Afterwards, the fact that they knew this would be a lever to get the right address out of them.

When she reached the hall, she was still determined to follow this course. But there was no telephone there as she had hoped, and she realized that she must ask where she could find one. Per-

haps Miss Hunter could tell her? Or would it be better to go straight to Dr. Freeman in his office and demand an explanation?

She decided on this latter course, but she was not halfway across the hall when Miss Hunter appeared, saying at once, "Oh, there you are, nurse! I've got your meal ready on the stove. Will you have it in the kitchen where it's warm, or shall I bring it up?"

"I'll come to the kitchen," Clare said. She realized suddenly how cold and hungry she was and decided that Miss Hunter, though still looking less like a housekeeper than a third-rate variety artist, might be coaxed or surprised into revealing the whereabouts, first, of a telephone and, second, of the house itself.

The meal turned out to be a generous helping of cereal followed by bacon and egg, synthetic coffee, toast and marmalade. Apart from the coffee Clare enjoyed it all and felt much better when she had finished it. She was sleepy now but still determined to follow her plan.

"Where can I find a telephone?" she asked. "I want to ring up my Association. It's a rule we have," she added, to give force to her request.

Miss Hunter looked confused.

"The phone's in Dr. Freeman's room," she said. "He's out this morning."

"Can't you take me there?" Clare asked. "Even if he is out."

"No," said Miss Hunter, seeming to gain courage. "No, I can't."

Clare left the kitchen, still more mystified. She wanted to sleep more than anything in the world, but she was bent on getting in touch with the hostel before she did so.

The hall was still quite deserted. Deliberately Clare went to the door she remembered from the night before, knocked, and receiving no answer, turned the handle. The door was locked.

This was a minor shock. Miss Hunter must have spoken the truth about his being out. It was not very strange that he should lock his office. He might have important papers there, besides money and drugs. But if the only telephone in the house was in his room and the door was locked, what happened if someone rang up Granville House? Miss Hunter could not be right. There must be an extension. Probably more than one.

Clare went slowly upstairs. It seemed weeks since she had last slept, months since the hospital dance and its horrible sequel. There was much in this curious new job to disturb, even frighten, her, but at the moment she knew she must rest, if only to be fit for

duty that evening. Before she lay down in bed, she wound up her watch. When she looked at the watch on waking from her deep sleep she saw that it was half-past six, and the sky outside the window was quite dark.

She found a bathroom on her own landing, bathed, and dressed quickly. The sleep had done her good. She felt alert, clear-headed, and more than ever determined to get in touch with her Association.

When she was ready, she wrote a brief letter to Sister Hood, telling her to give the police the envelope she had left with her. She explained briefly how and where she had found the box and the use she had made of it. She stressed the urgency of getting in touch with the police at once and ended her letter with the words, "I am going to ring you up now, if I can, because I saw the sea from my patient's window this morning. You must have got the wrong country. Where am I, I wonder. Love, Clare."

She sealed up her letter in an envelope, stamped it, and took it downstairs. Again Miss Hunter met her in the hall. This time the housekeeper seemed to be waiting for her.

"I've got your dinner waiting," she said. "Nearly came up to see if you'd overslept. He's getting impatient."

Clare stared at her.

"What d'you mean?"

"The doctor. Wants his dinner."

"We all dine together?"

"Last two days it's been him and Kay, Nurse Wilcox. He said not to wait for *her* after you were down. It's after seven."

The impatient doctor must have heard their voices in the hall, for a door, not that of his office, opened and he stood framed in the doorway.

"There you are, Nurse Marshall," he said evenly. "Come along in. Dinner, Miss Hunter. I'm starving."

Clare followed him into a dining room where two men and three women were standing near a blazing fire.

"My convalescents," he said in a low voice to Clare before leading her forward and introducing her all round. Evidently these people were dining, too.

There was nothing remarkable about any of them. They were all middle-aged, thin for the most part, with the vague eyes and languid manners of people recovering from an illness. Conversation was intermittent, rather forced, and very dull.

At the beginning Dr. Freeman and one of the men took the dishes from Miss Hunter through a hatch in the wall evidently connecting the room with the kitchen. Clare insisted upon helping, and Dr. Freeman was persuaded to sit down. The staff problem, Clare thought, is worse than they make out. There isn't anyone except our Daisy, she decided.

At the end of the meal the convalescents trooped out of the room, and Clare and Dr. Freeman put the dishes through the hatch.

"I want to ring up my Association," she said firmly when they had finished.

"I'm terribly sorry," he answered. "The phone packed up this morning. That was why I was away when you came down to see me."

So Miss Hunter had told him about that, Clare thought.

"Then where is the nearest telephone?" she asked, moving across the hall to the front door.

"In the village. About a mile."

She found the door was locked; not with an ordinary Yale, but something similar that did not open. Dr. Freeman's pleasant voice came again.

"We have to keep it shut. For the patients, you know. And the main gates at the lodge. One of the rules to satisfy the local inhabitants."

Clare was indignant.

"But that doesn't apply to *me*. I want to post a letter as well."

He held out his hand.

"Miss Hunter will put it in the box on her way home."

"But she lives in, doesn't she? I mean, she was here this morning—up, too—when I arrived."

"She very kindly stayed on. It was a crisis."

His voice and manner were compelling. Clare put her letter into his hand.

"We're all at sixes and sevens, Clare," he said. "Don't make it more difficult for me. I hate to refuse you—anything."

Her defeat prodded her.

"Then tell me where I am. I saw the sea from the window upstairs. This isn't Berkshire. Where is it?"

Perhaps he expected the question. His face did not change. He was still smiling gently into her eyes.

"You're due on duty," he said. "It's after eight. Nurse Wilcox won't be pleased."

"Where is this house?" she repeated obstinately.

He took her hand and led her to the foot of the stairs.

"They must have made a stupid mistake at your headquarters, to call it Berkshire," he said, laying his other hand over hers and stroking it slowly.

Clare let her hand rest for a few seconds. She felt her determination slipping from her. What did it matter after all?

She sighed and pulled her hand away. He dropped both of his instantly.

"I must go up," she said, slowly. "I only wondered—"

"Poor little Clare," he mocked softly, then added in his more serious voice, "Dorset, of course, my dear."

### III

Three days had passed since the hospital dance at St. Edmund's, and Dan Jackson was feeling acutely miserable, for no letter had arrived from Clare and it looked very much as if she were really fed up with him.

This did not surprise him because he knew it was all his own fault. The knowledge gave him no comfort, however. Quite the reverse. Why had he behaved like a lout, a clown, a sulky kid—anything but a man profoundly in love, as he knew his true self to be?

But no letter had come from her. He had written his, full of abject apology and pleading for forgiveness, on the evening of the very day she had gone to her new case. He had rung up the hostel first, hoping to speak to her, but had had to be content with getting her address instead. There could be no reason for her silence except continuing anger and affront.

On the third day he swallowed his pride and rang up the hostel again. It was possible they had given him a wrong address. They had been unwilling to give it at all until he had explained who he was and where he was calling from.

This time they refused flatly to repeat the address, advised him instead to send his letter to the hostel from where it would be forwarded, and rang off before he had even begun his vigorous protest.

That evening he was not on duty at St. Edmund's, so he went along to the hostel to sort the matter out with them there.

Molly, the receptionist, listened to his guarded explanation with sympathy, feeling romance in the air. Also there had been quite a

schemozzle about Nurse Marshall earlier in the day. All the telephone calls over her new case had been checked and rechecked. Her own notes of them had been taken away to Sister Hood's office.

"Perhaps you'd like to speak to Sister Hood?" Molly said hopefully.

"Anyone who's been in touch with Miss Marshall since she went on this case."

Molly took him to the night sister's office, where he repeated his request.

"I'm afraid that's just the trouble here," said Sister Hood, turning her worried face to him. "We have a strict rule that our nurses ring us up as soon as possible after they arrive at a new case, to make a report of the conditions, any complaints, any difficulties, and so on. Nurse Marshall did not do so."

"Then you don't even know—"

Sister Hood checked him with an uplifted hand.

"Let me finish, doctor. Clare went to this case very early in the morning, straight after she got back from that distressing episode she was mixed up in after your dance. I did not expect to hear from her until the evening at the earliest. Besides, she had said on leaving that she would write to me, so I thought she might be doing that."

"But she didn't? She hasn't written to me, either, and—"

Again Sister Hood interrupted his agitated speech.

"She did not. Nor was there any letter from her this morning, nor by the second post. When I came on duty this evening, I asked about this. It puzzled me very much. It was not like Clare Marshall at all. So I rang up the telephone number we had been given."

She paused; her worried frown had deepened, and Dan saw that her lips were trembling.

"What's happened to her?" he cried. "Don't stop. Tell me what's happened."

"The telephone number we were given does not exist," said Sister. "Nor does the address."

"Oh my God."

Dan stared. It couldn't be true. Not this sort of cheap melodrama. The white slave trade was a joke. Or wasn't it? Even in these days could—surely such an elaborate setup, a nursing hostel—

"Please tell me what you've done so far," he said in a low, tense voice that moved Sister Hood far more than his former insistent manner. "What have you done and what do you propose to do?"

She laid her clasped hands on the desk in front of her.

"Well, naturally, the first thing was to check the address. A telephone number can be mistaken. Granville House is the name—"

"Supposed name."

"Perhaps. Anyway, Granville House. It is not in any of our lists, but of course there are a number of private nursing homes not listed anywhere, as I expect you know."

Dan did not, and he seized on this.

"D'you mean to say you sent Clare off to a place you'd never heard of?"

"We were given a reference. This Granville House had been in touch, so they said, with Clarendon House convalescent home. Also a Lady Ede whom Clare had looked after there had mentioned her by name. It seemed perfectly aboveboard."

"You didn't check with this Lady Ede? Or the convalescent place?"

"At two in the morning? They asked for Clare by name. There was no reason to suppose there was anything wrong."

"By name? But the place doesn't exist!"

"They have not traced any nursing or convalescent home in Berkshire that has Clare on the staff."

"They?"

"The police," said Sister Hood. "Naturally, I informed them the minute I found it was impossible to contact Clare. I'm waiting to hear from them now. It's particularly worrying because she told me they wanted to keep in touch with her. I suppose she'll be wanted to give evidence at the inquest on that man."

"Of course," Dan answered. That had been another source of disappointment. He had hoped to see Clare within two days of the man's death. But as they had not yet identified him, the inquest had been postponed.

"They'll find her pretty quickly, won't they?" he asked.

He looked so young and so miserable that Sister Hood was touched.

"Are you—I mean, have you any right to be so specially concerned about Miss Marshall?"

She spoke so gently and sympathetically that Dan felt he could confide in her.

"We were practically engaged," he said. "My fault we weren't actually. I didn't like her being here. Wanted her to stay at St.



Edmund's. But that's got nothing to do with this." A disagreeable thought struck him. "Even if she couldn't phone for some reason, she could write, whatever her address was. It wouldn't stop letters arriving, would it? Unless—"

"Exactly," said Sister Hood. "Inspector Stevens said the same thing."

"*That chap! You've seen him then?*"

"No. I only started this a couple of hours ago. I'm expecting him to ring me back or call any time now."

Dan began to feel they had taken the whole thing in hand between them and there was no place for him in it. So he would have to step back and watch as if he were not concerned, not torn with anxiety and dread, not longing to dash out and search—

"Didn't she leave any messages—or anything?" he mumbled. This wall dropped in his path, this blank space without Clare, was unbearable. He remembered her pale, exhausted, unhappy face at the hospital when he had marched away from her with the inspector to show him the dead man. He remembered looking for her later and not finding her.

"Didn't she say anything?" he pleaded.

Sister Hood remembered the envelope. It had lain in her desk waiting for Clare's letter with instructions. She got it out now.

"She gave me this and told me she would write about it."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I shall give it to the police."

Without saying a word, Dan snatched it up and tore open the envelope. "You had no right—" Sister began, but seeing the expression on her young visitor's face, she stopped and stared instead at the object he held in his hands.

Dan was remembering what Clare had told him about her efforts to fix a tourniquet on the man's leg. An oblong box, she had said. So this was it? Why hadn't she given it to the police? It was a most valuable clue to the dead man's identity.

"Can you let me have a sheet of paper?" he said. "Fairly stiff. And a soft pencil? Thanks."

"What are you doing?" Sister asked. The poor boy seemed to be taking leave of his senses.

"I'm making an impression of the very interesting coat of arms on this silver snuffbox," he answered. "Ever heard of brass rubbings? Of church monuments and that sort of thing? Well, this is a silver rubbing."

He folded his piece of paper and put it away in his wallet.

"You can tell Inspector Stevens that Clare found that in the dead man's pocket and used it to try to stop the hemorrhage. I don't know why she kept it instead of handing it over. I don't know why she didn't tell you about it. She mentioned it to me. I hadn't given it a thought till you produced it."

He opened the box and held it towards Sister. "Not snuff of the usual kind," he said. "But snuff of a sort, perhaps. Don't lose those white grains, Sister. I think Inspector Stevens will be very, very interested."

He got up.

"If he comes along tonight, tell him I'll be at St. Edmund's until—" He paused. Tomorrow was his half day off. He meant to use it to advantage. "I'll be at St. Edmund's in the morning," he said, thanked her, and went away.

It was too late that evening to take any further action, but early the next morning, before he was completely bogged down in work, Dan made a telephone call and, during the time he was supposed to be at lunch, made his way north across the Thames to the Royal College of Arms, taking with him his rubbing of the lid of the snuffbox.

The research did not take long. The man who did it was courteous, interested, and gave Dan the impression that his true existence was in the Middle Ages or, if not quite so far back, at least in the seventeenth century.

"An old landed family, the Hethertons," his informer told him. "Property in the Isle of Purbeck. They were never ennobled; they never seem to have taken an active part in any but local affairs. Cromwell suspected them of royalist leanings and imposed a heavy fine, disguised as a tax, but he took no drastic action, except, of course, the general one of destroying Corfe Castle. So they managed to hang onto their lands all through the Civil War and the Restoration and later the revolution that sent James II packing. In the eighteenth century there was a Hetherton who wrote minor verse and another who married into the aristocracy."

He pointed out certain changes that had taken place in the coat of arms following this important event. Dan smiled and nodded, waiting for more. But nothing happened.

"What about now?" he asked. "Who owns it now? Where exactly is it?"

"Ah, now." The other seemed to have lost interest. "Run down, like so many other old families. They didn't make any changes in the last century, not after the new house was built. The original one was burned down in George III's time and a new one, larger than the old, built. Far too big for modern times. Besides, the family is almost extinct, I believe. The sons went into the army a good deal after Waterloo, where one of them gained some distinction. The wars in the Crimea and South Africa and then in this century played havoc with them, I think. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything exact about their history after 1900. Are you a descendant?"

"No," said Dan. "Just interested in—snuffboxes."

"I see." The man gave him a shrewd look, obviously summing up his youth and ignorance in the light of this assertion.

"Well, in this particular snuffbox," Dan amended, deciding to be more explicit. "Where did you say the Hethertons' place is?"

"Dorset. The Isle of Purbeck. Near a village called Hetherton Parva. I don't know if it still exists—the house, I mean. I rather think the owner lives abroad."

"And it's a large house? Then he may have let it for use as a nursing home or something of that sort? Would it be called Granville House, by any chance?"

"Oh no," the other said with a look of sheer repugnance. "Certainly not. Hetherton Hall."

"Near Hetherton Parva. I'll ask the A.A. how I get there. Thank you very much indeed, sir."

"Not at all. A pleasure."

It was Dan's half day, his free afternoon and evening. He went straight back to the hospital, got out his very old but carefully tended Austin car, and drove away to the west.

The Isle of Purbeck. That strange piece of land lying between Weymouth and Swanage and Poole, with its feet in the sea, the trunks of its prehistoric forest showing in stripes on the rocks that dip into Weymouth Bay near Lulworth Cove. He knew this coast well but not the hinterland. He would find Hetherton easily, the A.A. told him, if he made for Wimborne and then skirted Poole Harbour and drove on southwest. There was a list of place names beside him on the passenger seat of the car, together with an ordnance survey map of Dorset, borrowed from a fellow resident at St. Edmund's. It should not take him too long to get there, and the old

bus was running very sweetly. Of course it was a shot in the dark. He ought really to leave it to the police. He'd look pretty silly if they'd already found Clare and brought her back. As they very well might have done. They'd have got all the dope on the snuffbox themselves by now. It was so easy for them. They didn't have to drive all this way to find out if Clare was at the end of the Hether-ton trail.

Inspector Stevens was a very worried man. The utter stupidity of that Sister Hood at the nursing hostel infuriated him until he remembered that Sergeant Phillips had been less than thorough in the work that he had done there. He had confirmed that the place was genuinely a nursing hostel, but had he warned the woman in charge that Nurse Marshall must be looked after carefully and at all times held available for questioning? No, he had not even seen the woman. So all this and a rocket on its way for him—or Phil-lips—probably both. If they didn't find the girl in a matter of hours.

Dorset constabulary, very early the next morning, understood the urgency of the case and sensed the irritation behind the Yard's request for local knowledge.

"The Hethertons are an almost extinct species," the chief constable reported. "A sister and brother, both middle-aged. She's hardly ever down here, and he's abroad. Canada, to the best of my knowledge."

"Canada! Thanks very much indeed."

Explanations and suggestions followed, at the end of which the chief constable arranged that the local force would make inquiries. As a result of this, Constable Dunnet in Hether-ton Magna set out on his bicycle at nine o'clock to ride the five miles to Hether-ton Parva to start the ball rolling.

As he toiled up the last hill to the small hamlet, he was passed by a van that had the name of a London multiple store on its side. He found it halted outside the single shop in the village, which was where he intended to begin his own inquiries. As he was leaning his bicycle against the shop window, a man came out, climbed into the van, and drove off.

Dunnet was greeted by the owner of the shop as an old friend.

"Well, I was only saying to George last night it's been a month gone since you was out here last."

Mrs. Goodge leaned forward with both plump hands planted on the counter.

"How are you, and how's Bee?"

"Fine," he answered. "What they sent me up for is about the Hall."

Mrs. Goodge's smiling face changed and hardened.

"Bad to worse," she said, cryptically.

"What way?"

"Well, now." Mrs. Goodge leaned closer, and a spate of words began to flow from her wide mouth. Constable Dunnet, knowing he was quite unable to stop the flow or even slow it down, waited patiently, picking up a fact here and there, making an occasional inference.

At last Mrs. Goodge's words faltered, slowed, trickled to a stop. She did not seem to be in the least out of breath. Constable Dunnet got out his notebook.

"The Hall has not been occupied to your knowledge for several months?"

"That's right. Gone to wrack and ruin. Jim did the best he could with the garden and that till the wages stopped. Not been up since."

"But there's someone there now?"

"She come back couple of days since. Must be her. Tom says two cars went up the road three nights back. Then there's this van just gone up."

"Van that was outside when I got here?"

"That's right. Young fellow wanted to know the way. Like her to get everything down from London. Not like in her father's time. We supplied daily then. Granddad did, I mean."

"How d'you know it's her?"

"Young Jean goes on her bike past the Hall every morning. She works at Colter's. Says she saw Miss Ellen's bedroom window open. Curtains drawn, but window up top and bottom. In November, mind you."

"Airing the room," said Constable Dunnet. "This Miss Ellen—that's Miss Hetherton?"

"That's right. Called after her mother."

"E double L—"

"H-E-L-E-N," said Mrs. Goodge, severely.

"Right."

Constable Dunnet put away his notebook.

"I'll go up to the Hall," he said.

"They keep it locked," Mrs. Goodge told him. "You won't get in past the gates. I know because Jim tried. He was upset when she

turned him off the garden. Wanted to keep it going, wages or no wages. He managed to tidy the rose garden, he said; after that the gates was locked, and what with that and no wages, he give up."

"They'll have opened up for that van," said Dunnet reasonably and rode off.

He was pleased to find this surmise correct. The gates stood open, there were fresh tiremarks on the drive. There were several sets of tiremarks, he noticed. Getting off his bicycle, he looked at them for a few minutes. Then he walked round the empty lodge, peering in at the windows. It had not been occupied for years, and the constable found no suggestion that it had been used in any way recently. Some of the windows were cracked. One was boarded up. When he had walked all round it, he took hold of his bicycle again and walked with it up the drive to the front door.

The van was parked to one side of it. Constable Dunnet was not surprised. The drive had a turning halfway along, clearly marked "Tradesmen," but this had been ignored. Times had changed—on the whole for the better, he decided. Anyway, it made his work easier. If the van had gone round to the back of the house, he would not have known it really had called there.

He went up to the front door and rang the bell. He had to ring three times before he got an answer.

"Yes?" said the grey-haired woman who stood at last upon the doorstep.

Friend of the family, decided Dunnet. Or the lady herself, perhaps? He did not remember ever seeing Miss Hetherton. He had been in Hetherton Magna only the last six years.

"Is Miss Helen Hetherton in residence?" he asked, stumbling a little over the double aspirate.

The woman stared at him for a few seconds before replying. "Why d'you want to know?" she asked.

Why did he? Constable Dunnet had not the least idea. His orders were to check on Hetherton Hall. Who was there, if anyone. What they were doing.

"The Hall is usually unoccupied," he began. "I—I understood Miss Hetherton had had trouble with trespassers in the grounds," he invented, in a sudden spate of words.

"She hasn't said so to me," rejoined the woman.

This brought the conversation to another dead stop.

"Then Miss Hetherton is in residence? Could I speak to her for a few minutes?"

"No, you couldn't!" The woman's voice rose indignantly, and at that moment another figure appeared in the hall behind her, a greyhaired man also dressed in tweeds, also tall, thin, middle-aged.

"What's all this about?" he asked mildly.

Constable Dunnet turned to him with relief.

"I just wanted a word with Miss Hetherton, sir, about an inquiry I've been asked to make."

"What inquiry?"

Dunnet mentioned trespassers again; the man shook his head.

"I'm afraid you can't see her," he said. "She's ill in bed."

As the constable neither spoke nor moved, he went on, more irritably, "My wife—and I—are looking after her. We came down with her as guests—"

"Two—three nights ago?" said Dunnet, consulting his notebook.

The pair exchanged a quick glance before he looked up again.

"Yes," said the woman. "Late at night. Helen was not feeling well then. We persuaded her to stay in bed the next morning. She is not up yet."

"Had the doctor in?" asked the constable.

The man flashed an angry look at him but did not answer the question, clearly indicating that he would not admit such impertinence. Constable Dunnet decided he could go no further and had got what he had been sent to find.

"Well, thank you, sir," he said. "I'll contact Miss Hetherton in a day or two."

In silence the pair watched him take up his bicycle again. This time he mounted and rode off down the drive, without looking back at all. From the dining room window Dr. Freeman watched him go. As the other two came into the room he said, without turning round, "Well done. It wasn't as bad as you expected, was it?"

"No," two voices agreed behind him.

"Trust Charles," he said, keeping his light brown eyes still fixed on the retreating back of Constable Dunnet.

At Scotland Yard the most important part of Dunnet's report was the presence of the London trade van at Hetherton Hall. Dunnet had memorized its number before he rang the bell at the hall, and though it did not correspond with any of the vans reported stolen, that meant very little. Number plates were easily changed. Checking and crosschecking produced some interesting and illuminating results.

"The van may be useful. We'll get Dorset to trail it if it hasn't left."

So an innocent looking disguised police car drove past the Hall a little later that day and hid itself in a narrow side-turning. One of the men in it got out to reconnoiter the entrance. He found the main gates locked.

"So either the van's gone and we wait here for keeps, or it'll have to unlock when it comes out, which will give us a good start."

They settled down to wait.

Early in the afternoon in London, Inspector Stevens had another interview with Sister Hood. Clare's disappearance was getting her down. She had been unable to sleep and had got up very early, for her. The inspector called in answer to her frantic request for news.

"We're doing all we can," he said. "After all, we didn't get any sort of lead on Miss Marshall till last night."

"I know. It was my fault. I'll never forgive myself. Why? Why should anyone want to kidnap Clare? Why?"

"Material witness," said the inspector. "The man who was murdered has been identified now, thanks to Miss Marshall and young Dr. Jackson. Who seems to have disappeared himself, by the way."

"Oh no!" cried Sister Hood.

"It's his half day," the inspector told her. "But no one knows where he thought of going, and he's taken his car. Now, so far the other side don't know we have the dead man's name. At least we hope they don't. Yet. But they don't want Miss Marshall to give her evidence. Not till after the inquest. Probably not till the chief characters involved have made a getaway. The small fry we've pulled in don't know much. We're still ignorant of how they got Miss Marshall's name and address. They worked fast, arranging that job for her."

"I never thought—Lady Ede—"

"Of course, Sister, why should you? Actually they never contacted Lady Ede at all. They rang up the Clarendon House place and asked whom she had nursed there."

"How did they know she was at Clarendon House?"

"You told them yourself. Remember? The first time they asked for her. They said was she free and you said yes, she'd left Clarendon House five days ago."

"The devils." Sister Hood stared at him with horrified eyes. The inspector nodded.



"We're doing all we can," he repeated. "If you get any sort of message of any kind, let us have it at once. And don't worry too much. I don't think they mean to harm her, only keep her out of the way."

In his own mind he doubted the truth of his words. They were a coldblooded lot, devils as Sister had said. They'd stop at nothing if they thought it suited their book.

Meanwhile, at Granville House, Clare continued her rather curious and limited duties, taking the night shift in looking after the patient whose name she still did not know. She had not yet been able to ring up the Association herself, but Dr. Freeman, after telling her the line was not restored, said he had himself done so, reporting that she was well and happy. Had he done right?

He gave her such a boyish, amused smile as he said this that Clare found she could not be angry with him. For a second she thought of demanding to ring up Dan but recoiled from the idea. He still had not written to her, though it was now the third evening since she left London. Then there would be the usual difficulty of finding him in the hospital. No, let him make the first move if he wanted to see her again, ever. Probably he did not.

"Did you speak to Sister Hood?" she asked instead.

"She didn't give her name. I phoned just after midday."

"She wouldn't be up then."

Anyway, Sister would have got her letter, and she had no intention of discussing her horrible adventure with Dr. Freeman. He would be only too sympathetic. He could make himself very attractive when he wished. As now.

"You haven't been out much since you came here, have you?" he said.

They were standing near the closed french windows of the drawing room, which looked out on to the neglected garden. Clare had not slept well that day and had got up at half-past three, determined to find some way of stilling her persistent heartache.

"No."

She did not remind him of the locked door. She had not particularly wanted to go out for the last two days. It had rained a good deal, with a cold, blustering wind; not at all inviting. But this afternoon the pale sun already sinking in the west shone on the straggling Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums, almost choked with weeds in the borders.

"Can't you find any gardeners?" she asked. "It seems a pity to let it go; it could be a lovely garden."

Dr. Freeman was not at all put out.

"We use the garden for therapy," he said. "In the summer we had it in perfect order. Three of my patients were quite enthusiastic. Come out and I'll show you."

He took her out through the front door, which, she saw to her surprise, was unlocked. In the drive a trade van was drawn up at the side of the gravel. The London name on the side pleased her. It seemed to be a link with her home.

They walked round the house and across a roughly mown lawn. Beyond, behind a yew hedge, lay a rose garden. This at least showed signs of fairly recent care.

"I told you," said Dr. Freeman. "I hope to persuade more of them to take up gardening as a therapeutic exercise."

"There aren't many of them left," said Clare, and was startled at the implications of what she had just said.

For it was true. Of the five convalescents she had met at her first dinner there, three seemed to have gone. Only the two Frosts had appeared at dinner the night before.

Dr. Freeman said nothing, but turned to walk back towards the house, taking her by a shortcut across the wilderness of a kitchen garden and in by the back door of the house to the kitchen, where Miss Hunter was making up several small trays for tea.

Clare regretted her last remark. Dr. Freeman had been offended. In fact, he had not said a word to her since she had made it. Now, seeing the trays, she wanted to make amends.

"Shall I take some of them up?" she asked. "Nurse Wilcox—"

"Can manage very well," said Dr. Freeman, "with Miss Hunter to help her. The *eight* patients in bed are all doing very nicely."

"I'm sorry," said Clare humbly. Later she tried to work out whether this figure was correct. But she gave it up. She simply did not know where their rooms were, nor how many patients the place could take. Nurse Wilcox had said something about it when they first met, but now she could not remember.

Dr. Freeman did not acknowledge Clare's apology, and she began to resent his attitude. There was something she wanted badly to discuss with him, but in his present mood—

When they reached the hall, he turned towards the door of his office. "May I speak to you about my case?" said Clare firmly. "It's about the injections."

Dr. Freeman's back, which was towards her, stiffened. But he turned round a moment later and said, "Come in here." She followed him into the room.

"It's about the night dose," she said. "Nurse Wilcox always gives it before I come on duty. And she brings the morning dose with her when I go off. I'm accustomed to giving night medicines myself when I'm on night duty. Usually it's left to my discretion—"

"It's the doctor's job to prescribe," said Dr. Freeman, "and to order how and when drugs are given."

"I know. But it seems so queer. Don't you trust me to carry out your orders?"

"Of course I do." His voice changed. "Clare, I wish you'd settle down. You seem so nervy and restless. Is there anything that worries you?"

With that compellingly soothing voice in her ears and his hand on her arm Clare gave in.

"I had a nasty experience the night I came down here," she said. "I can't tell you about it. Don't ask me."

"Of course not. Now tell me, what would you like me to do?"

This was so different from his former manner that Clare looked up in surprise. His eyes were fixed on the door behind her. She swung round, but there was no one there.

"I should like you to issue the dose to me and let me give it," she said.

He looked at her as if he did not take in what she was saying.

"The dose," repeated Clare. "The ampoule. I have my own syringe and everything."

"Yes," said Dr. Freeman. "Wait here and I'll fetch it for you."

He was gone in a moment, shutting the door behind him. So he doesn't keep his drugs in his office, Clare thought, very puzzled. She moved idly to the bookshelves. No medical stuff here, mostly history and biography. She took down a book at random and opened it. On the flyleaf there was a bookplate. It bore the name Brian Hetherton with, above, a coat of arms. A distinctive coat of arms. She recognized it without difficulty. The coat of arms on the silver snuffbox she had taken from the dying man's pocket.

The book dropped out of her hands, and the noise of its fall shocked her into total awareness. She still understood very little, but one thing was plain beyond question. This was not a nursing home, and these people were in some sinister fashion linked with the man who had died.

She moved quickly to the desk. Scruples meant nothing in the face of her need to discover where exactly she was, and who these people could be. She was tempted to lift the phone and dial 999, but that would be too drastic and much too dangerous. She was back in the mood of that night in Stone Street, seeing a threat on every side.

Very softly she tried the drawers of the desk. Some were locked, but two were open. In the second of these she saw envelopes she recognized and, picking them up, knew that they were her letter to Sister Hood, her letter to her mother. They had not been posted: Dr. Freeman had lied to her. This place was a fraud, proved beyond doubt, all lies and make-believe. Except the woman upstairs. She was real: genuinely and seriously ill and kept so, she decided, suddenly realizing the truth of the injections.

A moment ago she had made up her mind to escape at once from this place, leaving her belongings, leaving everything. She saw that she could not do this. The woman upstairs needed her; she could not be abandoned. But there was one thing she must do. Get these letters posted.

She had no idea how she could manage that, but as Dr. Freeman had not come back, she left the office and walked quite slowly and naturally across the hall. The front door had been open a short while ago; it might be open still. It was.

The van had not yet left the drive. With the front door quietly closed behind her, Clare stood in the shadow of the porch, looking about. The light was fading, but it was clear enough for her to be seen going down the long straight part of the drive by anyone who might be watching at a window. She edged away from the porch, slipped behind the van, and squeezed in among the overgrown bushes behind it. From there she worked her way slowly towards the main gates, moving parallel with the drive but keeping hidden.

To her surprise she saw that the gates were open. Dr. Freeman had told her they were always kept locked. Then she remembered the van. They must have been opened to let it in and perhaps had now been opened again to let it out. They would be shut after it had gone away. From the front door she had not been able to see the gates, hidden round the curving last part of the drive. So no one could see her in the drive now except perhaps from an upper window.

She peered out from the edge of the bushes. The house was altogether hidden, she was pleased to observe. Growing bolder, she

stepped onto the drive and moved towards the gates. She would slip out and find a pillar-box. It was hours yet before she was due on duty. If they asked her, she would say she had gone for a walk. Why shouldn't she go for a walk when the door and the gates were open? Though it would look queer to have gone without a coat. She shivered a little, feeling suddenly very cold.

She had the letters in her hand as she reached the gates and was about to turn into the road when a black spaniel ambled round the gatepost, lifted a leg to it, looked at her, and then stood still, wagging his tail.

An idea came to Clare with a sudden feeling of pleasure and relief. This dog was no stray; he was on a routine evening walk. His master must be near, just out of sight in the road. She would give the dog the letters to take to him, then step out and ask if the spaniel might be allowed to carry them to the post. It would save time, and perhaps her absence from the house would not be noticed.

She stopped, patted the dog, who was still waiting, looking at her, and offered him the letters. He accepted them calmly, the tail wagging a bit faster.

"Take them to master," Clare said, turning him to face the gates.

But before either of them had time to move she heard the sound of a car behind her in the drive. Straightening herself with a jerk, she saw the van coming fast round the last corner.

She leaped for the cover of the bushes, but the dog stayed motionless, the letters in his mouth, puzzled by her behavior. The van did not stop, did not even slow down until after the inevitable impact, when with a loud screech of brakes it came to a jolting halt between the gates.

She had shut her eyes when the dog was struck. She opened them when she heard the man's feet on the gravel. She shrank silently still farther among the bushes, but dared not make any movement that might disclose her hiding place.

The driver, however, was not looking for her. With a muttered curse he dragged the dog from under the front bumper of the van and snatched up the letters. He looked at them, still muttering, and then looked quickly about him. But only for a second. Kicking the spaniel's limp body farther from the van, he jumped back into the driving seat, restarted the engine, which had stalled at his sudden halt, and without even sounding his horn drove into the road and away, nearly knocking down a man with a walking stick who at that moment was turning in towards the gates.

As soon as the driver got back into the van, Clare had gone, pushing her way back to the house, not heeding the scratches on her hands and face where bent twigs snapped back at her as she passed. The man's behavior was only too terribly illuminating, but even now she thought less of her own safety than of her patient, the helpless woman whose name she now guessed to be Hetherton, who seemed to be the pivot of all these extraordinary events, who undoubtedly needed her, without the thought of whom she would have been by now on the way to the nearest house to ask for help.

So she did not see the dog's owner exclaim in grief and fury and dash back into the road just in time to take the number of the van before it turned the next corner. She did not see him stoop to gather up the body of his black spaniel and walk slowly away towards the village.

Certainly she could not have seen the police car in the small side-turning. Nor did the driver of the van, preoccupied with the letters and the death of the spaniel. He had guessed who the man must be whom he had so nearly run down at the gates. He'd have to ring up and let them know about the letters. Cunning little bitch! How'd she got down there by the gates? Giving them to the tyke. Serve her right what it got. Good thing they'd opened up for him earlier. Wouldn't've done to be held up after what happened. But perhaps the dog wouldn't have come in if the gates had been shut. Oh, what the hell!

"Here we go," said the driver of the police car, turning out of his hiding place in pursuit. "Let them know we're off, Ted."

The message shot round Dorset and neighboring counties. Keep a lookout, but don't interfere. Put the Q cars on the job; don't let him know he's followed. Let the van lead them to the crooks' headquarters.

#### IV

Clare did not leave the shelter of the bushes until she arrived at the circular sweep of the drive in front of the house. She then summoned up what courage she had left after the shock of the dog's death and walked with outward calm, not too fast, the short distance to the front door.

The hall was empty, all the doors surrounding it closed. Clare went upstairs, thankful indeed to reach her own room unobserved. Her dress was stained, her apron muddled, her nurse's cap crum-

pled and soiled. She was quite horrified by her appearance when she looked at herself in the glass. Twice in the course of a few days, she thought, except that now there were no bloodstains.

She changed into a clean uniform and hid the scratches on her face as well as she could under careful makeup. Then she sat down to think.

It was dark outside now, but with the curtains drawn and the electric fire on and the shaded reading lamp beside her bed taking the place of the cold ceiling light with its plain white shade, the room looked cheerful and comforting. She had missed tea, but she did not mind that. If she had not slept so badly and had not got up as early as half-past three in the afternoon she would hardly have been about yet. Six o'clock was her usual rising time when she was on night duty. She was quite glad now that she had been wakeful. She had learned so much.

This thought brought her to a more disturbing idea. Dr. Freeman might already have discovered that the letters had gone from the drawer in his desk. In which case he would obviously suspect that she and only she could have taken them. Surely he must have made this discovery, even if the van driver had not rung him up to tell him of it? In which case, she decided, she would be in very real trouble. Perhaps, instead of sheltering in her room, she had better go down and find Dr. Freeman and have it out with him. In any case, it was now after six. And she still had to secure the drug for her patient. Without that, her plan for the night would not succeed.

So, reluctantly, she turned out the electric fire, put on a clean crisp apron, and went down to the hall. As she reached it she heard voices, raised angry voices, coming from the dining room. She paused, wondering what to do. Should she creep forward to listen, or would that be dangerous? What would happen if one of them came out and found her, ear to keyhole? Would it be better to go boldly in, asking if it was dinnertime, saying her watch had stopped?

Or just go quietly upstairs again for another half hour and appear at her usual time?

Her problem was resolved for her suddenly. The dining room door opened, and Nurse Wilcox's voice came out of it, quite clearly, quite explicitly.

"If you think I'm going to stop on while all of you—I'm not buying it—not at any price—repeat *price*, Charley!"

Nurse Wilcox, her head turned over her shoulder to shout at those in the room behind her, moved out into the hall.

"Good evening, nurse," Clare said in a firm voice.

"*Christ!*"

Nurse Wilcox's head came round, eyes staring. She saw Clare, clapped her hand to her mouth, and leaned against the doorpost. Dr. Freeman appeared a second later.

"Is Nurse Wilcox ill?" Clare asked stonily.

The woman's confusion had given her courage. If they were the crooks she now thought them, they were rattled. That was plain.

Dr. Freeman's face of astonishment and relief at seeing her nearly made her laugh.

"Did you think I'd walked out on you?" she said. "You didn't come back to the office, so I had another little breath of air in the garden."

He stared at her and she stared back, determined to give nothing away. When she saw his relief grow into pleasure, she dared to hope. So far, then, he had not been told about the dog and the letters. He could not look as he did if he knew what she had done.

"I see," he said. Behind him Nurse Wilcox straightened herself. Her face was white and her hands trembled, but her hard features had not softened. She put up a hand to her cap and then smoothed her apron.

"I'll go up to her, then," she said, addressing Dr. Freeman. "Nurse Marshall will come on duty at the usual time, I take it. I'll just trouble you for the evening dose, doctor."

Clare found her voice again.

"No, nurse. Dr. Freeman wants *me* to give it after I go on duty. I arranged it with him earlier in the afternoon. Didn't I?" she asked, turning to Freeman. She could not find it in her heart to call him "doctor." If what she believed about him was true—she knew no details—then he did not deserve the name. Medical training of some sort he must have had. Perhaps he had even practiced for a time. But he had betrayed his profession; in how many ways she did not yet know. In essentials, she was certain.

He was looking from one to the other of the two women, with the attractive boyish smile on his lips.

"Clare is right, Kay," he said. "I did promise her. So there's nothing to stop you going off duty now—"

"At eight," interrupted Clare.

"At eight," repeated Dr. Freeman. "Hand over, as usual, to Clare



at eight, Kay." The older woman nodded sulkily, then turned on her heel and moved towards the stairs.

"Excitable," said Dr. Freeman, following her movements with his eyes until she passed out of sight at the bend of the staircase. He put out a hand and took Clare's arm. "I'm so glad you're back. I was a little anxious."

"Why? You didn't think I'd break a contract, or leave a case unfinished, did you?"

He drew her into his office and stood looking at her with admiration, his hand still on her arm.

"You're a great girl, aren't you?" he said.

"That ampoule," Clare suggested. She acknowledged the strength of his technique, but it no longer affected her.

He frowned at her brusque insistence and made no move.

"You said you'd—"

Clare stopped, watching him, and was glad she had not finished her sentence. For a couple of hours ago Dr. Freeman had left the room, telling her he would fetch the stuff, and here he was unlocking the middle drawer of his desk to take out a whole carton of ampoules.

"I said I'd let you give it—yes," he answered her spoken words.

Clare took the ampoule and put it in the pocket of her uniform dress. She was not going to be parted from it now until she could safely destroy it. So long as the Wilcox woman had spoken the truth.

So long as they were not doublecrossing her.

She thanked Dr. Freeman and turned to go. But he stopped her.

"Don't run away, Clare," he said. "No point in going up to your room again. We're due for our dinner in a few minutes."

"But it's only half-past six."

"I know. The Frosts are leaving. I thought they ought to have a good meal before they start."

"Leaving? You didn't say we were going to dine so early."

"I didn't want to disturb you. Night duty is bad enough as it is for someone your age."

"But I've been up for hours. You knew I was up when you took me round the garden—"

Again his hand came out to her. This time his arm lay across her shoulders as he went with her to the door.

"Such a serious child," he murmured and drew her suddenly close and kissed her.

Clare dragged herself free and shot into the hall. She would have smacked his face if she had dared, but she knew that at all costs she must avoid open warfare. This behavior of his might well be deliberate provocation. To make her lose her head. To make her speak. He was clever, and he must know that her training had made her observant. He would want to know now how much she had seen or heard or guessed of the strange goings-on at Hetherton Hall.

She went quickly across to the dining room door, from behind which voices still murmured, opened it, and went in. Six people were already seated at the table, the two Frosts and four persons she had not seen before, one woman and three men. The woman had straw-colored hair and a listless expression. The three men were distinctly ugly: the sort of people you saw in the out-patient department on Saturday night, Clare thought, after the pubs closed and there had been rows and fighting.

Quite clearly they were not ill. Also quite clearly they had not expected to see her there. In fact, as she opened the door she had distinctly heard one of them say, "Here's Charley boy back. What's been keeping you, Char—"

Then he had seen Clare and bitten back the rest of his remark.

From behind her Dr. Freeman said, "Some more of my patients are down for dinner tonight for the first time. Let me introduce Nurse Marshall. You know Mr. and Mrs. Frost. This is—"

The dreary farce went on. Miss Hunter drew back the hatch door. Mr. Frost and Clare took round the helpings. There was desultory conversation during the actual eating and afterwards while they were clearing away. Clare was persuaded to follow them into the drawing room "because we're so early," Dr. Freeman reminded her. Coffee arrived. The Frosts said they must get their coats. Miss Hunter was summoned by bell and told to bring down their luggage.

Still Dr. Freeman would not let her go.

"Finish your coffee, Clare. Don't hurry," he said, leaving the room himself.

The talk flagged. The new convalescents did not seem to have a word between them. In the middle of the silence that began to be unbearable the listless woman pulled a box from her pocket and took snuff. The others regarded her with mixed expressions of astonishment, fear, rage, envy, and, in one case, amusement.

This was a small, rat-faced man who looked at Clare, gave a

hoarse laugh, and said, "She's a proper caution, nurse, isn't she?" "Is she?" said Clare coldly.

Finally, since neither Dr. Freeman nor the Frosts reappeared, she got up and left the room. No one spoke as she did this, but looking back from the door, she saw four pairs of hostile eyes fixed upon her. She shut it behind her and hurried up to her room.

When she got there, she locked the door and set about the plan she had already worked out. First of all, she got out her own dish, hypodermic syringe, surgical spirit, and cotton wool. Next, she cleaned the syringe by drawing spirit into it and pushing it out again several times. She then filed and broke off the head of the ampoule, which was, she saw, a stiff dose of a strong narcotic, and emptied the contents into her washhand basin. She then took a small corked bottle of boiled water which she had prepared in the patient's room that morning before she went off duty and filled her syringe with an amount of water equal to that she had poured out of the ampoule. She arranged her filled syringe, the broken ampoule, the spirit, and the cotton wool on her dish, covered it all with a small towel, and set it on her dressing table. Five minutes before she was due to go on duty she took up the dish, still covered, went steadily down the flight of stairs from her room, knocked at the patient's door, and walked in.

To her surprise there was no one there except the sick woman in the bed, who looked thinner and more haggard than ever, Clare thought.

She set down her dish on the table at the bedside and looked about for the temperature chart and notes. Nurse Wilcox, whoever she might really be, had some of the basic ideas of nursing. She had kept the chart properly, though her notes had been uniformly trivial, merely stating each time that the patient had been "quiet." No details of her true condition. No account of food given or any other particulars.

Clare took the temperature, pulse, and rate of breathing. Then, moving one arm outside the bedclothes, she prepared to give the injection. As she did so, she heard a footstep in the room but did not look up, thinking it was Nurse Wilcox. She gave the injection and then looked round. Dr. Freeman was standing behind her.

Controlling herself carefully, Clare pulled down the sleeve of the patient's nightdress, returned the arm beneath the covers, and picked up her dish from the table beside the bed. Dr. Freeman held out his hand for it. Trembling inwardly, Clare passed it over.

"Yes," he said, stirring the fragments of the ampoule with one finger. "You have given her the whole dose, haven't you?"

"Wasn't that right?" Clare asked. "I thought you intended her to have the whole. There is nothing prescribed in her notes."

"No," said Dr. Freeman. "My patients must be protected carefully from knowing what treatment I give. In case they get to like it too much," he added, looking Clare full in the eyes.

She kept her own steady. The man was a devil; an inhuman devil. Whatever else he had done, he had certainly kept this poor woman doped for days, deliberately, she now guessed, so she could not answer questions about herself or those around her. And he dared to speak like that of the dangers of addiction! She struggled to keep her eyes blank, to outstare him, to stand quietly, a well-trained nurse before a physician.

"Very well, nurse," he said gravely. "I'll examine, please."

For fifteen minutes he examined the unconscious patient, carefully, slowly, thoroughly. Clare went through the routine mechanically, moving the bedclothes, turning the limp body this way and that, until at last Dr. Freeman folded up his stethoscope, tucked it away in the pocket of his jacket, and turned from the bed.

"Satisfactory, as far as it goes," he said. "I'll consider reducing the sedation tomorrow." He moved towards the door.

"Dr. Freeman," said Clare.

"Yes."

"Who is she? What's the matter with her, really? Where does she come from?"

Dr. Freeman looked back, smiling.

"Her name is Hetherton," he said. "Helen Hetherton. Did no one tell you? She is a cocaine addict. I'm sure you've realized that by now. One of my most intractable chronic cases."

He gave a little dreadful leer, so different from his usual smile that Clare recoiled in something like horror.

"One of my most lucrative," he said with a laugh.

When he had gone, Clare sat down, feeling weak and shaky. What luck over the injection! She had made her elaborate preparations to deceive Kay Wilcox. If she had known Freeman himself would come, she might not have dared. Never mind, in a few hours this Miss Hetherton, whose name she had already guessed from the book downstairs in the doctor's office, would begin to wake up, and then perhaps she herself would be able to understand what was going on in this dreadful place. Only a few hours.

In less than two hours the patient began to mutter and turn from side to side. Clare hurried to the cupboard where the usual provisions for the night were kept. It was empty.

She went to the door and out onto the landing. Something in the complete, utter silence of the house struck alarm into her mind. Very quickly, leaving the room door open, she ran down to the kitchen. Miss Hunter was not there.

No one was there. In all that large house, whose every room now was unlocked, where in some of them shrouded furniture stood under the dust of years, in others there were signs of recent occupation, no person moved, no voice answered hers.

So this was why Dr. Freeman had come to the sickroom. This was why he had made his slow and careful examination, taking her attention off everything but himself and what he was doing. He was covering up the exodus. They had all crept away, to waiting cars, probably, and he had joined them at last and was probably laughing his head off now at her expense.

She went quickly from landing to landing, then down again to the hall. The crooks had vanished. Had they been frightened away? Had the man in the van brought bad news earlier that day? Had someone telephoned a warning?

The telephone. She ran into Dr. Freeman's empty office, noticing as she did so that all the papers on the desk had been cleared away and the surface of it was clean, even polished. She picked up the receiver. It was quite dead.

Of course, she thought dully. They would never leave her such an easy way of deliverance. Had they left her any way at all, or was she locked in with the sick woman upstairs?

A moment's panic left her as quickly as it came. Alone in the house she had only to open a window to get out. They knew that, of course. She went to the front door to test her conclusion and found it justified. The door was not locked. She opened it to look into the drive. Darkness. Utter darkness. She could not even see the trees on the other side of the sweep before the house. It would be madness to go down to the gates now. Even supposing they were open and she could find them in this blackness, the road outside would be just as dark and she would only lose herself. What good would that do to anyone? To herself or Miss Hetherton. Miss Hetherton!

She shut the door, ran back to the kitchen, collected the materials for a light supper onto a tray, and carried it upstairs. As she

reached the door of the room, she saw her patient leaning on an elbow staring from haggard eyes towards the door.

"Who are you?" the woman croaked. "What are you doing in my house?"

Dan found his way without much difficulty to Hetherton Magna, where he arrived a little after four o'clock. But he took a wrong turning on the road to Hetherton Parva, and not discovering his mistake until he saw the sea in front of him from rising ground, he had to go back and start again. This time he found the small hamlet without any difficulty. It was growing dark now, so he stopped at the general store.

Mrs. Goodge was holding an animated conversation or, rather, delivering one of her animated lectures to two women of the village. When she saw Dan, however, she broke off at once to serve him. Her disappointment at finding he was not a customer was canceled by her interest in his inquiry.

"Well now!" she exclaimed. "That's the second time today a stranger has come in here asking the self-same question. Had a young fellow in this morning, not to mention Constable Dunnet on his way up there, too."

"Indeed," said Dan. So the police *were* onto it. He hoped he was not too late. It would be bitter indeed to find Clare gone. He urged Mrs. Goodge to tell him how to get to the Hall and left with a brief word of thanks as soon as the route had been made clear to him.

"There now!" Mrs. Goodge said, gathering back her former audience. "What's going on up there, I'd like to know? That young gentleman was in a hurry, if you like. Did you notice 'e changed color when I remarked on Fred Dunnet going along this morning? Might be that brother of hers back from overseas in trouble. Shouldn't wonder. He's been gone years and never a word out of him, good or bad."

Dan drove off, found the narrow road that led past the Hall, and was soon rewarded by the sight of a continuous substantial wall, with parkland inside and in the distance the roof of a large house. He slowed down, expecting to see the entrance before long.

He was right. There were the gates, and walking slowly toward him in the gathering dusk was a man in a tweed coat and baggy grey flannel trousers carrying in his arms the limp form of a black spaniel.

Dan stopped the car. The man looked profoundly upset; his face

was very pale under his country tan, and his lips were bluish-grey. He was not young.

Dan wound down the window of the car and leaned out.

"Can I help in any way?" he said. "I mean—the dog—"

The man stopped, grief and anger deepening in his shocked face.

"Brute in a van. Came tearing out of the Hall drive. No horn or anything. He's killed him. Nearly got me, too."

"Didn't stop?"

"Accelerated. I got his number, though. Trade van, too—London."

"How long ago?"

"Couple of minutes."

Dan got out of the car. A van. The woman in the shop said a van had asked the way to the Hall.

"Look, sir," he said. "You hop in. Put the dog on the back seat. No, that's all right. We'll chase the lout."

The man's face flushed. Ex-army, Dan thought. Action meant something to him. Without argument or delay he got into the car, and they were off.

"We don't know where he was going," he said as they started, "but he shot away up the road. Straight ahead," he added as they passed the side-turning where the police car had lain hidden.

"Probably back to London," Dan suggested. "Wonder what sort of speed he can make?"

"Much the same as you, I should think," his companion said with a faint smile. "I think we'd better conclude he's making for London and take a shortcut ourselves to the London road. He won't know it. We'll make up five minutes on him with luck. If we don't find him by the time we reach Wareham, we'll give up." He turned to look at Dan. "Why are you doing this?" he asked.

Dan told him. As he drove on guided entirely by his companion, he told him about his own profession, about Clare's adventure, about her apparent kidnapping, about his own researches.

"I used to know Brian Hetherton," the man beside him said. "My name's Arkwright."

"General Arkwright?" asked Dan.

"Brigadier. Retired. Why did you say that?"

"Strategic grasp," said Dan.

Brigadier Arkwright laughed again: he had recovered from his shock, Dan decided, and was now enjoying the hunt.

They came out on an empty London road and after ten minutes

were beginning to decide that they had failed, when a van passed them traveling at moderate speed.

"That's it," said the brigadier. "You beat him to it. Good show!"

Dan settled down to the pursuit, keeping well on the tail of the van. A car behind him made one or two attempts to pass and then drew back.

"Better not let him think I'm following," Dan said, allowing the gap to increase between him and the van. The police car behind came out, passed both Dan and the van, and disappeared into the darkness ahead to warn the next relay car to pick up chase.

In Wareham the van left the London through-road to wind in and out of several side streets before coming to a stop near a telephone booth. Dan drew up twenty yards away.

"If he goes in to phone, we've got him," he said.

"Have you a spanner or crank handle available?" asked the brigadier politely.

Dan hesitated. He did not want to get into a scrap. He merely wanted to know if Clare was at the Hall.

"Why not get a policeman?" he said. "I'll keep tabs on him."

Arkwright got out of the car. The man was already in the booth. He had his back to them, beginning to make his call, when the brigadier pulled open the door of the booth and brought his hand down in a rabbit punch across the stooping back of the other's neck. He dropped like a stone, and the brigadier quickly dragged him out of the booth onto the pavement.

"Now we can look for a bobby," he said calmly.

He knelt by the fallen man and took first a gun and then some letters from his right-hand jacket pocket. Dan at once recognized the writing on the envelopes.

"Give me those," he said. "Clare wrote them. She's at the Hall. She must be!"

A crowd had gathered about them already.

"I've got to get back to the Hall," Dan urged in a low voice. "Will you cope? I can't risk being stuck with the law here."

"Of course," said the brigadier briskly. "Put my dog out on the pavement and get away at once. Ah, officer," he said, rising to his feet as a tall figure pushed through the crowd. "This man has just run over my dog in his van. He refused to answer my questions, so I stopped him. He appears to be a doubtful character. He had this on him."

The figure on the pavement stirred and groaned.



"Your dog, did you say, sir?" asked the constable.

"My black spaniel, Spot. He's on the edge of the pavement, behind the van over there."

Dan heard these words directly after he had deposited the dog and started his car. He drove off, took the next turning towards the London road, and was soon out of the town and heading back towards Hetherton.

As it was now quite dark, he followed the route he had taken earlier in the day, not attempting Brigadier Arkwright's shortcut. He stopped the car short of the Hall gates, parking it well up on the verge of the road after turning it to face the way he had come. He meant to take Clare away from this place, and he might have to go in a hurry.

He went up to the gates. They were still open as he had seen them when he met Arkwright. For a few seconds he wondered if he should drive boldly in, demand to see Clare, and insist on leaving with her. But he decided that though this would seem to be a properly heroic gesture it was probably about the silliest thing he could do. No one must know he was anywhere near or had anything to do with Clare. So he walked back down the road, where he found a tree growing conveniently near the wall. It was easy to climb it and from one stout branch reach the top of the wall, which was not guarded with glass or any other dangerous obstruction. He let himself down on his arms and dropped into a soft bed of leaves.

For some time he wandered in the rough parkland surrounding the house, uncertain of where he was or where he would find a path to lead him to the building. At last he saw lights in the distance and realized that the house was just ahead of him and that he was approaching a wide lawn. He began to stumble among the hummocks of long-neglected grass.

Slowly and carefully he made his way round the open space until he reached a thicket of bushes, where he stopped and listened. No sound of any kind came from the direction of the house. After another pause to make sure of this, he moved forward again, skirting the bushes until he saw he had indeed arrived at the building, which stood up very black against the clouded night sky. His eyes were well accustomed to the dark by now. He followed the line of the wall and came out into the open near the porch, where a glimmer of light fell on the gravel from the fanlight.

There were lights, too, behind curtains, in several rooms, he saw as he crept nearer. So the place was still occupied. Should he ring

the bell? No, he had decided against bold action of any kind. Then should he try to make his way in by some window, if he could find one unlatched?

He did neither. He went up the steps, turned the large handle, pushed open the wide door, and walked into the house. The hall was empty. The doors of the rooms were all open. There was no one there.

This was a shock. Had the crooks been warned? Had they snatched Clare from him again if not before his eyes, then just before he got there?

He shivered and knew that he was afraid. The next instant he found another explanation. Had the police come here? Was it the criminals who had been taken away? If so, was Clare with them, safe but snatched from him just the same? His feeling of helplessness, of futility, deepened. What the hell was he doing here at all?

He decided to make sure the whole place was empty before going back to his car. So he moved slowly up the stairs, and as he reached the first landing he heard a soft murmur of voices. He laid his head against the door from behind which the sounds were coming. To his infinite joy he heard Clare's voice say, "Try to eat a little more, Miss Hetherton. You must get your strength back, mustn't you?"

Inside the room Clare was bending over her patient when she saw her stiffen, stare towards the door, and exclaim, as she had done so recently, "Who are you?"

Clare shot upright, turning to face the door, fear clutching at her heart. There stood Dan, disheveled, moss sticking to his jacket from his climb over the wall, earth on his shoes, and a broad grin on his face.

Without a sound, wholly forgetting Miss Hetherton, she flew to his arms. He held her close, trying to understand her muffled, disjointed words. It was the patient on the bed who recalled them to their senses. She had watched them with astonishment that passed into incredulity.

"Nurse!" she exclaimed. "*Who* is this young man? *Why* is he here? *Why* are you both behaving like the last scene of a tedious film?"

Clare freed herself to go back to the bed. She looked down at Miss Hetherton with a scarlet face, but could say nothing.

"Miss Marshall and I are engaged," said Dan firmly, moving forward. "She was brought here under false pretenses because she

knows too much about an incident at a certain nightclub in London where I think you were yourself four nights ago."

Miss Hetherton's face was quite blank.

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about," she said. "I've been ill." She put a shaking hand to her head and went on, more to herself than to them. "This is my house. This is my room, but I'm damned if I remember how I got here." She raised her voice, looking at them with startled eyes. "How *did* I get home? I was staying in London. I have to stay in London to get—"

She broke off, taking Clare's hand in hers and beginning again in a coaxing, wheedling voice that sent a chill down her hearers' spines. "I take snuff, my dear. A pretty silver snuffbox. On my dressing table, I expect. I want it, please. I want it. My snuffbox!"

"Oh God!" said Clare under her breath.

"It isn't here," Dan told her.

"Not here? It must be here! I must have my snuff. I must—"

"Listen, Miss Hetherton. Your snuffbox was found in your brother's pocket. It is in London."

"Brian!" the sick woman said. She lay back on her pillows, breathing fast. "Brian. Yes. I remember. At the club. He went with me. I didn't want to take him, but he insisted. He took my box from me. *He* took it!"

She covered her face with her hands.

"Yes," Dan prompted her. "He took it. And then?"

She looked up at him. "He went away," she said. "He didn't come back." She suddenly gripped Dan's wrist. "How d'you know he took it, young man?" Her eyes became small and cunning. "Does he use snuff himself, d'you think? Did Charles fill the box for him?"

"Who—" began Dan but Clare stopped him.

"You mean Dr. Freeman, don't you, Miss Hetherton?"

She laughed. "Yes. Such a good kind doctor. We couldn't get on without him. D'you know Charles Freeman?" she asked, peering up at Clare.

Dan put out a hand to the girl's arm and drew her away from the bed.

"No good wasting time trying to get any sense out of her," he whispered. "We've got to get out of here."

"I can't leave—"

"No, listen. I've got the car in the road. The house is absolutely empty, and the front door is unlocked. I don't understand it. I don't like it. They may have left it that way because you're no longer

important. I hope so. But why did they leave *her*? When her mind's clearer, she can ruin them finally. She's right in the racket, isn't she?"

Clare nodded.

"They may have thought she'd be dead. I gave her water instead of the last dose of morphine."

"We'll have to take her with us. That or wait for the police. They must be on the way."

"Don't let's wait. Please not."

"Darling! I hoped you'd say that. Can you get her up?"

"I'll try."

"Right. I'll have a quick look round the house."

"No. Don't go without us. I'm frightened. Help me to get her up."

Miss Hetherton protested a little, but she was getting very restless as the effects of the narcotic wore off and her need for cocaine grew stronger. She became voluble, and though her ramblings were disjointed, Clare and Dan learned a good deal more about the life she had been leading for the last five years, ever since her brother left her to go to Canada.

At last they had her dressed warmly. Dan helped her into a fur coat while Clare ran upstairs, bundled her own things into a bag, put on her uniform overcoat and hat, and joined him again at Miss Hetherton's door.

The latter was on her feet, leaning on Dan's arm. Clare moved to her other side.

"He's a doctor," Miss Hetherton explained carefully to Clare. "He's going to take me to his surgery and give me—what I need to take. He understands, nurse. He understands."

They got her downstairs and across the hall and, by slow, painful steps, down the drive towards the gates.

"We'll never get her over the wall," Dan muttered to Clare across the drooping figure between them. "I'm banking on no one's seeing us go through the gates. I wish I could be certain they've all gone and are not watching us from some hideout."

"Don't!" said Clare. "I can't take much more."

After the last bend they peered ahead.

"Can you see if they're still open?" Clare said anxiously.

The answer came from the road: a hum of powerful engines, a long brilliant headlight snaking over the hedges, giving them an instant clear picture ahead.

"They are open," Dan said with relief.

"The cars are stopping," Clare cried. "It might be—"

"Off the drive!" Dan ordered.

They swung Miss Hetherton round, almost lifting her off her feet, and plunged with her through the bushes. A second later Dan tripped, swore, and fell on his face. The immediate sequel, drowning Miss Hetherton's faint cry and Clare's exclamation of concern, was a muffled roar from the house they had just left.

At the same instant the headlight of the leading car turned into the drive. Whoever it was, they were coming in, and the distant thunder had made them pause in the act of doing so. Miss Hetherton, continuing her strange bleating cry, broke from Clare and struggled back into the drive.

"Stop!" yelled Dan. He had disentangled his feet from the wire that had tripped him and now leaped up. Crying, "Stay where you are!" to Clare, he pushed through the bushes, yelling again "Come back!" to the stumbling, grotesque figure of Miss Hetherton, who with flying hair and outstretched hands staggered on towards the now stationary car.

Dan had taken two steps towards her when she reached the wire and set off the second charge. He never knew afterwards if in that split second of awareness he had flung himself down or if the explosion had caught him. Certainly Clare was taken unawares. It seemed to her that the world had suddenly split into fragments with a roar and a flash that both deafened and blinded her. She found herself lying with her face in the leaves, sobbing for Dan. But it was not Dan who knelt beside her, asking if she was hurt.

"Dan!" she screamed, picking herself up and clutching at the uniformed figure.

"He'll be all right. Only dazed and a bit bruised where the drive came over and hit him."

"Miss Hetherton?"

"Come along to Dr. Jackson, miss. He's asking for you."

This magnificent understatement was quite enough to pull Clare together. She was not hurt. The thick screen of bushes had protected her from the worst of the blast. She needed no assistance to reach the drive and paid no heed to the small crater in the middle of it, the police car with its shattered windscreen, the group of figures standing close together near the crater. She found Dan lying covered up with rugs near the gate, two more figures lying beside him.

She flung herself down.

"Are you really not badly hurt?" she cried, still sobbing and shivering. "Oh, darling, what happened? Tell me you're not hurt and what happened?"

"Of course I'm not hurt," his voice came weakly. "Not now I can see you're all of a piece."

"What happened?" she repeated.

"Double booby trap. The police car was meant to go up in the drive, and set off the bomb in the house to get you and Miss Hether-ton, when they searched the bushes."

"Miss Hether-ton!"

"It got her all right."

"Poor woman," said Clare. "I tried to stop her, but she thought it was Freeman come back with her dope. I heard her trying to call to him."

She glanced round at the other two bundles.

"They were in the car. Cuts from the windscreen and shock."

"I must help," Clare began but one of the bundles spoke.

"They've fixed us up already, nurse. You've done your share. We're not too bad, really."

She sat down beside Dan and took his head onto her lap, and he gave a great sigh of content. They had both done their best and now they were well out of it, he decided.

A red glow came up over the trees that hid the house from the gates. Hether-ton Hall was well alight. By the time the ambulances had done their work and the police car had been moved from between the gates and the crater filled sufficiently for the fire engines to get through, there was not much left of it. For the second time in history Hether-ton Hall was burned to the ground, but this time it would not rise again.

Both Dan and Clare spent that night at a hospital in Dorset. His injuries were all quite superficial, and though he found the next morning that he was stiff all over, he was passed fit to drive his car, which the police had obligingly brought in for him. So by the late afternoon he and Clare were both back in London and by the evening were heartily sick of describing their adventures over and over again, both to their friends and to Scotland Yard.

In the latter place, however, they did get some satisfaction in return. The Yard was, on the whole, quite pleased with them. Dan's chase after the man in the van had at first appeared to wreck the careful plan of letting the driver in it lead the way to the

headquarters of the gang. But the brigadier's rough method of securing the killer of his dog broke that brutal coward's nerve. He understood that the game was up, in more senses than one. He swore that he was on his way home; that Dr. Freeman was the head of the drug syndicate; that Brian Hetherton had followed his sister to the nightclub, made a row, started a fight that had brought in the cops, got himself knifed, and was dumped in Stone Street, while the whole outfit, except himself and one other, piled into cars and went down to Hetherton Hall. His job was to watch the dying man and take steps to prevent him being identified too soon. He and another had got Clare's name and address at the hospital.

"It was my fault you didn't have the snuffbox earlier," Clare said remorsefully.

"It didn't really hold us up. There were other clues," she was told.

"Have you got Freeman?" Dan asked.

"Watch your newspapers," was the answer to that one.

There was a silence and then Clare said, "Those bombs or whatever they were? They were meant to get the police car first, and that would have set off the other one in the house and got Miss Hetherton and me?"

"Something like that. Or you first at the gates if you'd left. You've got Dr. Jackson here to thank for saving your life."

That evening, in his sitting room in the residents' quarters at St. Edmund's, Dan reminded her of this remark. She put her hands on his shoulders, holding him away from her.

"You don't have to tell me again. But I'm going to remind you of something."

With his arms round her he began to draw her close. "Go ahead."

"If you hadn't been so—mean—and—and—well, I wouldn't have taken that job if I hadn't wanted to get away from you."

"Touché. I'll never behave like that again. I swear it."

His face was close above hers.

"I'll never run away again."

"I'll never let you. Because we'll be together from now on. We'll be married, won't we?"

"If you still want me, Dan."

"If? Darling, I've never wanted anything else."

This time no urgent call interrupted the sealing of their bond.

# UNSOLVED

by Walter  
Shepherd

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the January issue.*

You may buy a turkey from the butcher, the farmer, and the poultry thief. Starting from each in turn, find your way to the turkey, but on your way from the thief, you must avoid the London policeman or forfeit your bird. If the price corresponds with the distance you go, which is the cheapest turkey?

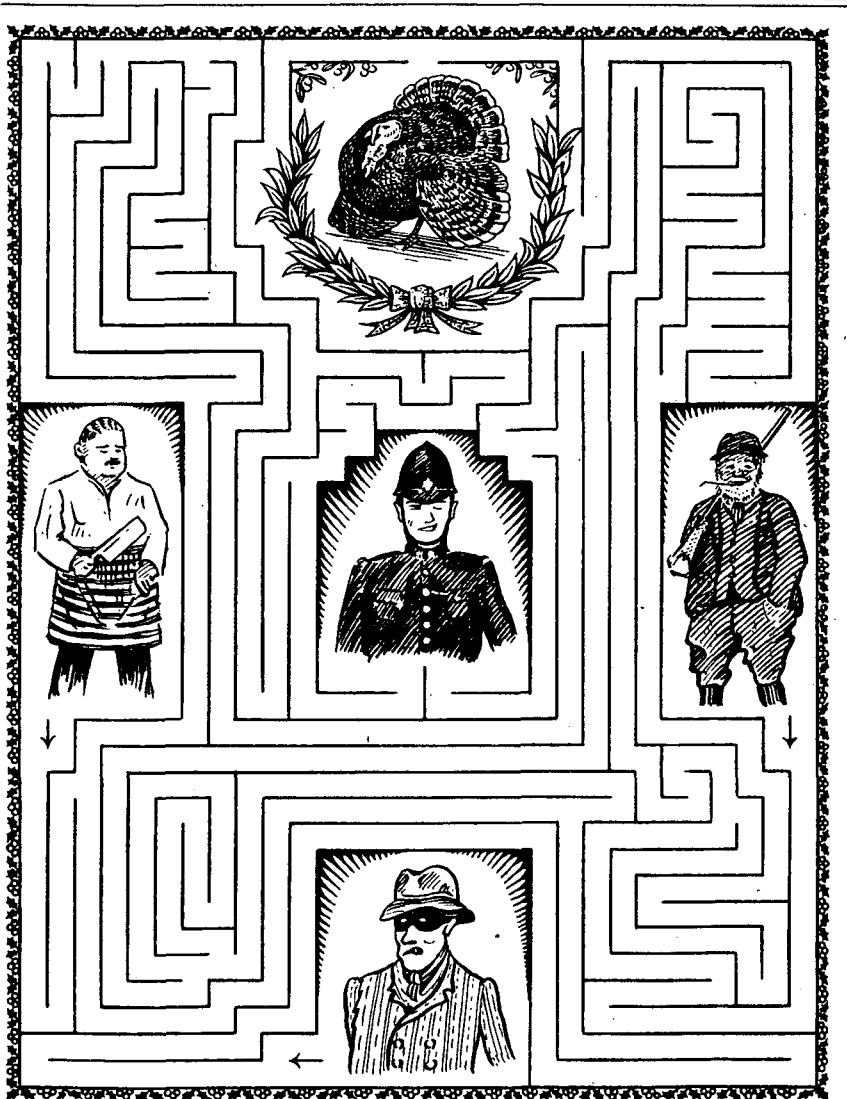
NOTE: On your three journeys you may use some of the same paths over again, but not on any single journey. (As if you would!) Try to find the shortest path each way.

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See page 202 for the solution to the December puzzle.

*"Talking Turkey," from BIG BOOK OF MAZES AND LABYRINTHS by Walter Shepherd, © 1973 by Walter Shepherd, originally published by Dover Publications, Inc. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).*





# Red Dust

by Patrick Irelan

“Who found the body?” Adcock said.

“Charlie Scofield. He was fixing a hole in the fence over there.” Deputy Foley pointed at the fence on the other side of the ditch. “If he hadn’t spotted it, it might’ve been here forever. You can barely see it from the road.” Scofield was standing a short distance away with a group of onlookers, describing in detail his discovery of the body.

“Does he know anything about it?”

“Not really.” Foley was tall and slim. He had curly brown hair and a boyish face.

“Then I guess I’ll go down for a closer look.” Adcock stepped off the shoulder of the blacktop road and started down the side of the ditch.

“You won’t want to stay close very long, sheriff.”

“I don’t want to stay close at all.” Adcock made his way down cautiously. The ditch was deep, and he knew that broken bones did not heal quickly when you were sixty years old. He didn’t look that old, with his

black hair and clear blue eyes, but he was. Halfway down he took out his handkerchief and held it over his nose.

The body lay at the bottom of the ditch, hidden from the road by the weeds and tall grass. The county could no longer afford to mow along the roads. It could barely afford to patch the potholes.

The corpse had already started to decompose, but the essentials were still clear enough. The body belonged to a white male with blond hair and green eyes. He was about forty-five. There was a small hole in the back of his head, though not a great deal of blood. He might have been goodlooking at one time. The heat and the flies had changed that.

The man had on a dirty undershirt, baggy dress pants with frayed cuffs, and leather shoes with worn heels. The uniform of the homeless male. Adcock had seen it a thousand times before. A few hairs, some brown and some gray, clung to his dirty pants. One other thing caught Adcock’s attention. Red dust.

He looked back up the slope toward the road. The grass and weeds showed where the body had rolled down. Not a final descent that showed much respect for the dead.

Adcock had seen enough. He climbed back up to the road, pausing halfway to catch his breath. He was in good shape for a man his age, but it was ninety-eight degrees and the slope was steep. When he reached the top, he took another breather, then spoke to his deputy. "Everyone else on the way?"

"Yes. Dr. Finney will be here soon, and the DCI agents are coming down from Des Moines. Kevin's writing up a car accident south of Clearfield. Then he's coming over." Kevin Hunter was Adcock's other deputy. Together, the three men enforced the law in Fox County. Only the county seat of Clearfield had a police force—four men altogether. If you needed a cop anywhere else, you called Adcock.

"I hope you told Doc Finney not to wear his best suit. You know how mad he got on Jake Lambert's place."

"I told him."

"What do you make of this?" Adcock said.

"Looks like a tramp to me. Probably got his clothes at a Salvation Army place. Looks

real lean. Probably an alcoholic. Might have been staying in an abandoned farmhouse. There's plenty of them around here."

"What about the wound?"

"Small hole in the back of the head. Looks like a .22 caliber fired from slightly above."

"And what does that tell you?" Adcock could never resist an opportunity to instruct his young deputies.

"They told us at the academy that mob executions usually look like that."

"And you could've learned that by reading a newspaper." When Adcock had been a deputy many decades before, there hadn't been an academy, and he still questioned its value.

"But what I wonder," Foley said, "is why gangsters would kill anyone out here in the first place."

"Maybe they didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Kill anyone out here." He waited for Foley to get it, but to no avail.

"But there's a body in the ditch," Foley finally said.

"Exactly. That's all we have. A body. Someone dumped it here, but we don't know where he was killed, do we? It could've happened a hundred miles from here."

"Ahhh."

"Did you see anything else?"

"I saw some brown and gray hairs on his pants. Obviously not his own."

"Anything else?"

Foley pondered a few moments. "Don't think so."

"Did you notice the red dust on his shoes?"

"No, I guess I missed that, sheriff."

"If you look around here, you won't see any red dust anywhere. The dust along the road and in the fields on either side is black or brown or gray, but not red. Even if you dug down to the clay, you'd find that it was yellow. But the last time that man walked on this earth, he walked in red dust. If we could figure out where, we'd know where to start looking for the killer."

Dr. Finney, the county medical examiner, arrived dressed in khaki pants and a short-sleeved shirt. He exchanged greetings with Adcock, asked why this had to happen on Monday, and began his preliminary examination. Deputy Hunter pulled up ten minutes later. Detectives from the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation got there last, armed with cameras, tweezers, plastic bags, and bad attitudes. Iowa law required them to assist in the investigation of every murder in the state. The stress of the long farm depression of the

seventies, eighties, and nineties had brought them more business than they could handle.

Adcock watched the detectives go about their work while his deputies tried to keep traffic moving. If the killer or killers had left anything behind, the DCI agents would find it. Adcock was sure of that. But what would they do with it? That was the problem. You can't match a suspect's hair with a hair left on the victim's body until you *have* a suspect. At this point the DCI detectives didn't have one.

Adcock didn't have one either, but he knew where to start looking. And he planned to keep it to himself for the present. He was just as jealous of his own turf as anyone else. When someone dumped a dead body in Fox County, he wanted to be the one who found the killer.

A trooper from the Iowa State Patrol showed up to help direct traffic. After exchanging pleasantries, Adcock motioned to Foley to come with him, then checked in with a DCI detective with thick glasses and very little hair. "Find anything?" he said.

"Found a lot of things. Just don't know what to do with them yet." Adcock nodded sympathetically. "Did you happen

to notice the red dust on his shoes?" the detective asked.

"I did see that."

"Any idea where he might have picked it up?"

"I've been trying to figure that out."

"And?" The detective stared at him.

"Still trying."

The detective stared at him some more, as if he wasn't sure what to think, but he finally turned away and went back to work. Adcock told Hunter to stay behind to help direct traffic. Then he and Foley walked over to their patrol cars. "I hope you've been thinking about red dust," Adcock said. "Have you?"

"Yes, I have." Foley was beaming like a kid, which, at age twenty-two, he still was.

"And?"

"Pitston."

They climbed into their cars and drove west across the width of the county, through desolate little towns and past abandoned farmsteads, across the prairie and through the wooded hills to Pitston. The town contained about forty people, compared with the three hundred that had lived there until the 1960's.

They parked on the town's single commercial block. Only two businesses were still open,

a grocery store on one side and a tavern on the other. A small playground with swings and a merry-go-round stood at the end of the block. Most of the words on the park's sign had worn off, but Adcock could still remember them: "Constructed for the Children of Pitston as Part of the War on Poverty. Lyndon Johnson, President, 1965." The park was empty.

All the buildings on the block dated back to the nineteenth century. All were two stories high and constructed of bricks. The street, like all the others in town, was covered with red dust, a product of the shale used as gravel. The shale had come from the coal mines that once surrounded the town. When exposed to the air, the shale oxidized and turned red, sometimes almost pink. The coal miners of Pitston had dug up enough shale to gravel all the streets the town would ever build, plus a great deal more. When the mines closed in the sixties, gravel wasn't the only thing lost. What Pitston needed most was the one thing it never again found: jobs.

Adcock and Foley got out of their cars and stood in the street. There wasn't much danger of getting run over in Pitston. No one else was in sight. Adcock led the way into the tavern on the south side of the

street. The room was dark and smelled of urine. A window air conditioner struggled noisily to keep the temperature below ninety. The place was as empty as the street out front.

"Hello, sheriff. Hello, Jim," said the man behind the bar. He wiped off a damp spot with a white towel.

"Hello, Carl," Adcock said.

"What brings you out this way?" He stopped wiping and leaned against the bar.

"Someone found a dead body dumped along the road on the other side of the county."

The man pushed away from the bar and stood up straight. He looked startled. "A dead body?" he said.

"That's right. We're trying to figure out who he was. He had red dust on his shoes, just like the dust anyone gets on his shoes in Pitston. I wondered if you might've seen him. He looks about six feet tall, has blonde hair, is real lean like an alcoholic who spends all his money on booze, was wearing ragged old clothes. About forty-five. You see anyone like that around?"

The bartender rubbed the back of his neck and pondered. "No, can't say that I have, sheriff. I don't remember seeing anyone like that."

"Take your time. Think about it. If he was in Pitston

and wanted a drink, he'd come in here, right? This is the only bar in town."

"Yeah, but he could buy beer at the grocery store across the street. Not that I mean anything bad about Dora, you understand."

"This guy didn't look like a beer drinker, Carl. He drank wine or hard stuff."

"There was one guy who came in a time or two. Didn't say much except what he wanted to drink. That might be your man. But he only came in once or twice."

"Any idea where he was staying?"

"Oh, I don't know anything about that. I just saw him in here, and he didn't say a word about himself." He started wiping the bar again, even though it was as dry as the red dust on Pitston's streets.

"All right, Carl, if you think of anything else, you let us know, okay?"

Adcock and Foley walked back out into the killing heat. "Not too ready with his information, was he?" Foley said.

"No, he wasn't," Adcock said. "Let's go see Dora. She'll be more helpful. If she knows anything, she'll tell us."

They walked across the street to the grocery store, which Dora Martino had operated by herself since her hus-

band's death ten years before. She met them at the door. "John," she said, "where have you been keeping yourself? I haven't seen you for a year. Too many bank robberies in the rest of the county for you to come to Pitston?" She stretched out her fleshy arm and shook Adcock's hand. "And who's this with you? Not Dorothy Foley's boy?" Foley's face turned a vivid shade of red. It was hard being a cop in the same county you grew up in.

"That's who he is, and he's not such a bad kid."

"I'll bet he's not."

"Dora, I wanted to ask if you've seen a man around town lately." Adcock gave the man's description.

"Sure, I've seen him. He's been hanging around town for about two weeks. He comes in here every now and then to see if I have any week-old bread to let go cheap. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't."

"You know where he's staying?"

"Yes, I do. He's staying on the second floor of the old barbershop across the street and down at the end of the block. It's empty now, like most everything else. I can see the back of the place from my house. I've seen him going up and down the back stairs lots of times. The place is a wreck, but

it's probably better than sleeping under a tree. The rent's good, too."

Adcock grunted.

"Rent?" Foley said. It was the first word he'd spoken since entering the store.

"Free rent, hon. Who'd pay to live there?" Foley nodded agreement, and Mrs. Martino looked back at Adcock. "You want me to watch for this guy? Did he rob the Clearfield State Bank? Wouldn't make much difference from what I hear. About to go broke anyway. Too many farmers can't make their payments."

"No, don't bother watching for him. I don't think you'll ever see him again."

"Why not?"

"He's dead. Someone shot him in the back of the head and dumped his body in a ditch over close to the Van Buren County line."

"No."

"I'm afraid so."

"That's why I haven't seen him for two or three days. I wondered if he'd moved on. That's how it is with these drifters. They stay awhile. Then they disappear, and you never see them again." She stared out the window for a moment, then back at Adcock. "This scares me, John. Now I wonder about those other men."

"What other men?"

"Every once in a while, four or five guys show up early in the morning in a big shiny car and park in back over there. They go up to the second floor of the building next to the one this dead man's been staying in. They stay all day. They don't come out for anything. When night comes, they take off and I don't see them again for five or six days. Then one day they show up and do the same thing all over again."

"Do they always come the same day of the week?"

"No, you can never tell. I guess they come any day they feel like it."

"When's the last time you saw them?"

Mrs. Martino thought for a moment. "Four days ago. I wouldn't be surprised to see them again any day now."

"Who owns those buildings, Dora?"

"Tom Hughes owns the old barbershop, but I haven't seen him near the place in years. He's real poorly. Ellen's been taking care of him since her mother died five years ago. The county owns the other building, though I doubt if it wants it. Ruth Fancetti stopped paying taxes on it after Frank died. This town's going, John. There's hardly anyone left, and the ones still here are having a

race for the few plots left at St. Joseph's. You wouldn't think a town could change this much in just one lifetime, but it has. You remember what it used to be like."

"I remember," Adcock said. No one said anything else. An old man with a cane and a slow gait came through the door, and Mrs. Martino went to sell him a loaf of bread and a carton of milk.

"We'll be back shortly, Dora," Adcock said. He and Foley waved goodbye and walked out.

Adcock left his car parked and rode with his deputy. They drove east along Main Street, past untended gardens and abandoned houses, past St. Joseph's Church, shuttered and empty. The street ascended a hill and turned left at the top. Thomas Hughes' large Victorian house stood two doors from the corner overlooking the rest of the town, which fell away to the west.

Hughes' daughter, Ellen Roemer, answered their knock. "Dad's not well at all," she said. "It's his heart. I try not to do anything to upset him."

Adcock got the hint. "We won't be long," he said. "We won't say anything to get him worked up."

She showed them into the parlor where Hughes was



watching a religious program on TV. He had gray hair and a broad nose and was about sixty pounds overweight. He started to get up, but Adcock motioned for him not to bother.

"Haven't seen you for a long time, John."

"No."

"I don't get out much any more. Too old. Too sick. Too crippled up. Ellen goes out whenever we need something. I just stay here. Sometimes Todd comes down to help out." He motioned toward a picture of his grandson. Like his mother, Todd had dark hair and dark eyes.

"You're lucky to have them to help you. Not many parents can count on that nowadays."

"That's true. That's very true. And it's very expensive to hire help now. I'm not sure I could afford it."

Adcock was sure that Hughes could afford it. He had inherited three mines on the edge of town and had operated them very profitably until the sixties, when the markets for his coal disappeared. Hughes liked to pretend he was hard up, that he had no savings. He didn't want people asking for contributions to worthy causes. No one believed him, of course, but no one called him a liar. It was a harmless fib, as long as he told the truth to the IRS.

"But you didn't come to hear me complain, did you, John? Tell me what's on your mind."

"You know the old barber-shop on Main Street? You own that building, don't you?"

"I confess that I do, though I don't know why I keep paying taxes on it. It's as worthless as all the high-sulfur coal left under the whole worthless town. I guess I keep hoping I'll find someone to buy it. Wouldn't like to buy a barbershop, would you, son?" He looked at Foley, who blushed and looked at the floor.

"We think a man's been staying there, in the apartment on the second floor. Probably just a drifter. You wouldn't know anything about him, would you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. As I said, I don't get out much. But I don't want anyone staying there. If someone gets hurt, they'll sue me whether they had permission to be there or not. I don't want him in the place."

"Don't worry about that. He won't be suing anyone. He's dead. Murdered, apparently." Adcock related the discovery of the body. "What about you, Ellen? You get out more than your dad. Have you seen this man around?"

"No, I haven't seen anyone like that." Ellen still had the features of a pretty woman,

though she looked older than her forty-one years. "There are so few people in town, you rarely see anyone outside the grocery store. The tavern still has some business, but I don't go there."

Adcock turned back toward Hughes. "Would you mind if we looked around the apartment above the barbershop?"

"No. Go right ahead. Look it over as much as you want. I hope you find something more than bird droppings. I'm going to get rid of that wreck for sure now. I don't need a lawsuit at my age."

Ellen showed them to the door. "You'd better talk to Carl Swenson," she said quietly. "I'll bet he knows something about this. I don't trust him. I don't want my father to hear this, but I think Carl sold beer to my son when he was sixteen. His business is in trouble, and I think he'd do anything for money, even rob a homeless man."

Adcock thanked her for her help. Both he and Foley put on their hats before stepping off the porch. It hardly seemed possible, but the heat was worse now than before. The temperature had to be at least a hundred degrees.

They climbed into Foley's patrol car and drove back down the hill. Adcock said that at

this temperature the taxpayers could afford air conditioning, and Foley turned it on. They parked across from the barber-shop and went around to the back, where they climbed the rickety stairs and found the door standing open. The latch was rusted and useless. A brick lying just inside suggested that the dead man had used it to keep the door closed while he was in the apartment.

The man had left clear evidence of his stay. Two empty Thunderbird bottles. An empty apricot brandy bottle. A crumpled container that had once held twelve slices of bologna. Half a pack of Pall Malls. A tattered white shirt lying in a corner. The label on the shirt said, "Made exclusively for Culloiden's Men's Wear, St. Louis."

"Looks like an expensive shirt," Foley said.

"It's the name on the label that makes it expensive," Adcock said. "You can buy the same shirt at a department store at half the price."

Foley looked at Adcock skeptically. In his gray work pants and blue shirt, the sheriff did not inspire confidence in his knowledge of men's fashions. He refused to wear either a uniform or a business suit. He rarely carried a gun. Work clothes and a badge were all he wanted, though both deputies

wore brown and tan uniforms and carried .38 caliber revolvers.

In the pocket of the white shirt Adcock found a small piece of paper with a note written on it:

*Remember Columbia?*

*M.S.R.*

Someone had torn off the name of the person to whom the note was addressed. The paper appeared to have been crumpled up, smoothed out again, and folded. The sheriff showed it to Foley. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. Columbia, Missouri, maybe. That's where the University of Missouri is."

"And the condition of the paper itself?"

"Someone started to throw it away, then changed his mind."

"Any other possibilities?"

"One person threw it away, and another decided to keep it."

"That about covers it. Why don't you go see what else you can find."

Foley wandered into the next room while Adcock put the bottles, the bologna container, the shirt, the cigarettes, and the note into plastic bags, sealed them, and attached labels. In a few minutes Foley returned.

"Find anything?" the sheriff said.

"Just a door."

"A door?"

"Yes, a door that leads into the next building."

"That's a little unusual. Someone must have owned both buildings at one time. Is the door locked?"

"Yes, but it would be easy to get in. The hinges are on this side. Should we?"

"The county owns the building, and we work for the county. So why not?"

They removed the pins from the hinges, pulled the door away from the frame, leaned it against the wall, and walked into the next apartment. "My, my, my," Adcock said. "Just look at what we have here. The governor won't like this a bit."

Along the opposite wall were four crudely installed phone jacks. A light bulb hung from the ceiling, but when Foley flipped the switch nothing happened. With the exception of cobwebs and dirt, the room was otherwise empty. Adcock and Foley searched the rest of the apartment but found nothing else of importance.

They put the door back in place but left the pins out of the hinges. Instead, they found a board and propped it against the door to hold it in place. Then they went outside and climbed the stairs to the other apartment, where they found

the door secured by a padlock. After putting the evidence they had collected into Adcock's car, they went back again to see Mrs. Martino.

"I hope your time was better spent than mine," she said. "After old Mr. Dorn left, my only customer was a teenager who wanted to buy cigarettes. I told him the sheriff was in town and I couldn't do it."

"You always were a responsible citizen," Adcock said. He and Mrs. Martino laughed at their wit, and Foley managed a smile.

"We found a few things the dead man left behind," Adcock said, "and I suspect the other men you've seen will be back."

"Oh, I hope not. Do you think they killed that poor man?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out." He paused. "Why do you think Carl Swenson claims he never saw any of these men?"

"I couldn't say for sure. He would've had a chance to, but he's always been a little secretive. I don't know why."

"What about Ellen Roemer and her husband? What happened to him?"

"They got a divorce. He was mean to her and the boy. Then when her mother died, she quit her teaching job in Des Moines and came straight home. She's a real sweet girl, John. You

don't need to worry about her."

"I understand."

"She has a tough time with her dad. He's a pill. Always has been. Too spoiled as a boy."

"I know."

"But these men in the big car scare me, John. What if they decide to throw someone else in a ditch? Some old woman like me?"

"Don't worry about that, Dora. You'll be perfectly safe."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Deputy Foley is going to come back and sleep on your couch every night until those men return."

When Sheriff Adcock got back to his office late that afternoon, Deputy Hunter reported that the DCI agents had found a small tattoo on the murdered man's back. It included an American flag plus these words and numbers:

*Parris Island  
1st Bat. Co. B  
1968*

"A real patriot," Adcock said.

"I guess so," Hunter said.

Adcock called the Clearfield chief of police, the Iowa State Patrol, and the DCI to discuss the men Dora Martino had seen in Pitston. Then, against Dr. Finney's often-stated advice, he went out for a sirloin steak and fried potatoes.

Adcock didn't have long to wait. His phone rang at seven o'clock the next morning. "Sheriff," Foley said, "they're here. Five men in a blue Cadillac. They carried in five folding chairs, four card tables, two cardboard boxes, and an ice chest. Looks like a picnic."

"Good. Don't join them until we get there. Don't move a muscle. You understand?"

"Got it."

"It'll be about an hour."

"We'll be here. Mrs. Martino hates to open late, but I convinced her."

"The Pitston economy will survive. Tell her I'll be over for a root beer."

"She'll have a cold one waiting."

Adcock hung up and made three phone calls. Half an hour later he and Deputy Hunter were driving north on Route 63, followed by the entire Clearfield police force in two squad cars. When they reached the road to Pitston, three men from the State Patrol and three more from the DCI were waiting. They joined the convoy and headed west.

Forty minutes later, Deputies Foley and Hunter and two Clearfield policemen crept up the back stairs and into the apartment above the barber-shop. After another five min-

utes, the rest of the men emerged from behind Mrs. Martino's house and sprinted for the stairs leading to the other second floor apartment. Adcock would have liked to go first, but he deferred to the younger, faster men. With their shotguns raised, they looked like a squad of duck hunters doing the fifty yard dash.

They reached the stairs at a dead run, their feet on the steps sounding like distant thunder. A six foot five, two hundred twenty-five pound highway cop hit the door with everything he had. The rotten wood disintegrated like a balsa-wood glider at the same moment that Deputy Foley jerked open the interior door from the other apartment.

By the time Adcock trotted in, the picnic was over. "Well, well, well," he said, "Ricky Schneider and his young friends. You know, Ricky, this won't look good on your record. It'll probably keep you out of West Point."

A fat man with his legs spread and his hands on the wall looked over his shoulder. "Very funny, Adcock," he said.

"And Warden Oakes is going to be very disappointed in you."

"May your mother sizzle in hell."

"Take them in," Adcock said.

Even before the uniformed cops got the thugs out the door, the DCI agents happily began taking inventory. They had grown tired of the murder-suicides of distraught farmers and failed merchants. But old fashioned racketeering still held some charm. In addition to the tables and chairs, the agents catalogued five pistols, four telephones, a radio, ten thousand dollars in cash, ten copies of the *Daily Racing Form*, and a computer-printed list of several hundred names and telephone numbers. Entrepreneurs needed the best tools available.

Adcock lingered awhile to talk with the agents. "The politicians said parimutuel gambling wouldn't lead to book-making," he said.

"That's what they said, John," replied one of the busy agents.

"What did you think?"

"All I know is I've never seen one without the other. Have you?"

"No." Adcock walked down the stairs and up the slope to Mrs. Martino's house. "Come on, Dora," he said. "I need a root beer."

After the root beer, the sheriff went across the street to Carl Swenson's tavern. The place still smelled of urine. Adcock dispensed with the pleas-

antries this time. "Carl," he said, "I don't see how a bookie joint could operate right next door without your getting suspicious. This isn't the middle of Chicago. Five guys in a Cadillac attract attention in Pitston. It makes me wonder if you were getting something out of it. Your bar doesn't seem to be doing too well." The tavern was just as empty as the day before.

"No, John, I swear, I had nothing to do with those guys."

"Someone told me you're so desperate you're selling to minors."

"And I can guess who: Ellen Roemer. But maybe you should ask her why she went up to the apartment over the barbershop a week ago."

"And you saw her, right? And you still expect me to believe you didn't see five bookies next door? Come on, Carl, you've been around. What am I supposed to think?"

"Sheriff, I admit I saw them. I had my suspicions. But I swear I had nothing to do with them. I know I should've called you, but I was scared. Who would protect me if they found out? We have no police here, and you're almost twenty miles away. I know what those guys are like. They'd kill me without giving it a second thought. I'd disappear one day, and my family would never see me again.

You know what I mean, John."

"Uh-huh. Tell me one other thing, Carl. You're not from this town originally, are you? Where did you come from?"

"Missouri."

"Where in Missouri?"

"Columbia."

"What did you do there?"

"I ran a bar, but I lost my lease."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. So I decided to try someplace else."

"And came to Pitston?"

"Right. I saw an ad in a newspaper that said this bar was for sale. The ad didn't say how bad business was."

"All right, Carl, we'll leave it at that for now. But I'll be checking back with you."

"Sure, sheriff. Anytime at all. You can count on me."

Adcock headed back toward Clearfield to greet his new guests. An hour later, he was sitting across a table from Richard Schneider, who was loudly protesting his innocence.

"Me and the other guys have been in Waterloo for five days, and I got witnesses to prove it," he said.

"Names, addresses, and phone numbers," Adcock said. "Not that I'll believe any friends of yours anyway." Schneider gave him the infor-

mation. "Okay," the sheriff said, "so who was this guy?"

"What guy?"

"The dead one."

"I don't know. I never saw him."

"He was living next door to your traveling bookie joint. How could you miss him?"

"It's not a bookie joint."

"Then what is it?"

"A telemarketing firm. We move around to get the best phone rates."

"So why did you kill him? He steal your phone book? Refuse to get off the line?"

"I didn't kill anyone."

"Yes, you did. You shot him in the back of the head the way you punks like to do it."

"Grow up, Adcock. If I shot him, where's the gun and where's the bullet?"

"The medical examiner is taking the bullet out of his brain. He'll send it to the lab boys, and I'll send them your guns. Then they'll find the gun that matches the bullet. They're good at that. So why don't you just spill it right now."

"I got nothing to spill, Adcock."

"You know what I think?"

"Surprise me."

"I think this drifter stumbled onto your bookie joint and you killed him to keep him quiet. Then you dumped him on the

other side of the county to keep us off your trail."

"You're desperate, Adcock. You're swinging wild. You found a body, and now you need a suspect. But all you have is circumstantial evidence, and not a hell of a lot of that."

"Ricky, the prisons are full of people sent there on circumstantial evidence, but I won't waste my breath trying to explain. The problem with punks like you is that you're stupid, and stupid people make stupid mistakes. Your main mistake was that you came into my county thinking I'd never find out. You paid Carl Swenson to keep him quiet, and you thought you had a perfect setup, but your whole operation was so obvious that you might as well have put up a neon sign. Then this drifter came along and spoiled the party. So get ready for another state-funded vacation, Ricky. It won't cost you anything but your time ... and one other thing."

"Yeah?"

"The lab needs a strand of your hair."

Adcock sent Schneider back downstairs, then had successive chats with his four helpers, collecting a strand of hair from each one. All four denied all charges. They couldn't understand why a simple telemarketing firm would arouse so much

opposition from the sheriff. One even suggested that Adcock was too old for police work and should retire to Florida with the other old folks. Adcock promised the punk a retirement of his own and sent him back downstairs.

Dr. Finney called late that afternoon. "I have something for you, John," he said.

"Go ahead."

"I'm sure you saw the bullet hole, but that's not what killed him. He died of arsenic poisoning. Someone shot him after he was already dead, which is why there wasn't much blood. Waste of ammunition, if you ask me."

"I won't ask."

"Judging from the amount of decomposition and the hot weather we've been having, I'd say he'd been dead for about two days when you found him."

"What else?"

"The usual dental work. Also, a long scar on his leg. He'd had surgery for a broken leg at some point. That's about it. I'll send someone over with the whole report in a few minutes."

"Thanks."

The paperwork from Dr. Finney arrived twenty minutes later. Adcock looked it over. Then he called the Pentagon.

It took him awhile to con-



vince someone that he actually was the sheriff of Fox County, Iowa. Once past this obstacle, he found that nobody wanted to answer his questions. A Lieutenant Bates finally agreed to find out what he could and call back.

By this time it was almost four o'clock, and silence was descending on the old limestone courthouse in the center of the Clearfield town square. Adcock looked out the window of his second story office at the taverns on the east side. By unspoken agreement, the tavern owners had segregated themselves on that block many decades ago. A lingering effect of Prohibition. The Iowa Theater, the Royal Cafe, and the Davis Hotel all stood on the same block. Adcock reached for a cigarette, then remembered that he didn't smoke any more. A lingering effect of Dr. Finney.

Deputy Foley came by to compare notes, then left for the day. Adcock talked to his other deputy about a burglary. Then he looked out the window awhile longer and reached for another nonexistent cigarette. Why, he wondered, would Schneider poison a man and then shoot him in the head? Why would a homeless alcoholic come to a village like Pitston instead of staying in a city where shelters and soup kitch-

ens would provide at least some assistance? And why did Carl Swenson and Ellen Hughes Roemer both claim not to have seen this man, even though he would've stood out in Pitston like Boris Yeltsin. At five o'clock the sheriff put on his hat, locked up, and walked over to the Royal Cafe.

Three days later, on Friday, Lieutenant Bates called back. He had made many phone calls and searched many files. In doing so, he had compiled a list of every Marine recruit with the initials M.S.R. who had completed basic training in the 1st Battalion, Company B, at Parris Island, South Carolina, in 1968. He had also retrieved their physical descriptions and medical histories and compared them with those of the murdered man. There was one perfect match: Mark Steven Roberts from St. Louis, Missouri. He had received a dishonorable discharge in 1970 after getting drunk and stealing a car. Lieutenant Bates promised to send a typed copy of his findings.

Adcock hung up and looked out the window at the Iowa Theater. The marquee announced the showing of a horror movie of the sort that teenagers line up for. The sheriff turned from the window,

picked up the phone, and dialed. "Ellen," he said, "we've identified the dead man. His name is Mark Steven Roberts. Does that mean anything to you?"

She paused. "Not really, sheriff."

"A note we found in his shirt pocket mentions Columbia. Do you know anyone who might have lived in Columbia or gone to school there?"

"No. My parents and I all went to the University of Iowa, and my son is there now. It's a family tradition."

"One more thing, Ellen. Someone says he saw you going up to the apartment over the barbershop a week ago."

"I'll bet that's what he says. It was Carl Swenson, wasn't it? Well, it's not true. I haven't been up there for years."

Adcock said goodbye, hung up, and pondered for a moment. Then he picked up the phone again and called the police department in Columbia. He quickly learned that Carl Swenson had not been entirely truthful about his tavern in Columbia. He *had* lost his lease, but only after a jury had found him guilty of selling beer to minors. Next Adcock called the University of Iowa to check Ellen Roemer's story, then made two more calls to Columbia. Finally, he called Susan Roth

Murray in Kansas City and had a long conversation. Things were starting to make sense.

Adcock waited for the lab to call him the following Monday. When he heard the report, he wasn't really surprised. The hairs found on the dead man did not match any of those collected from the five bookmakers. The bullet removed from the man's brain had not been fired by any of their pistols. But the lab technicians did find traces of arsenic in the man's empty brandy bottle. Adcock checked his gun registration files, then walked down the hall to see Judge Barnes. An hour later, he radioed Deputy Foley and told him to pick him up at the courthouse.

It was a pleasant drive out to Pitston. Rain had cleared the air during the night. The sky was blue and the temperature cool. They parked in front of the house and walked up the steps to the porch.

Ellen came to the door. "Good morning, sheriff. Hello, Jim," she said.

"We need to talk to you, Ellen," Adcock said. "It would be better if your father didn't hear us."

"Let's go into the music room," she said. "It's quiet and private." The men followed her

into the room. Adcock sat down when invited. Foley remained standing:

"Ellen," Adcock said, "as I told you on the phone, we've learned the identity of the murdered man."

"Yes."

"And I now know how and why he was killed."

"The gamblers. Did they shoot him?"

"I don't think so, Ellen. And the bullet didn't kill him anyway. He was poisoned. Someone shot him after he was already dead, apparently to throw suspicion onto the bookmakers. It was a crude attempt to hide the real cause of death. It might have worked a hundred and fifty years ago, but forensic medicine can easily uncover that kind of deception nowadays."

"Someone killed him by putting a large dose of arsenic, probably rat poison, into his bottle of apricot brandy, someone who knew that an alcoholic like him wouldn't throw away a bottle of brandy just because it had a funny taste."

"But why would anyone in Pitston kill a homeless man?" A look of confusion settled on her face.

"Because he knew a secret from the past, a secret that he was prepared to reveal if he didn't get what he wanted. He

came to Pitston to blackmail a woman he'd had an affair with twenty years before. He sent her a cryptic note, a note that only she would understand. She tore her name off the paper. Then she found the man, wadded up the note, and threw it in his face."

"Oh?"

"He knew the woman's father was very religious and that he had a bad heart. He thought the woman would pay a lot of money to keep the secret from her father, knowing that it might kill him. What he didn't anticipate was that the woman would kill him instead."

Ellen said nothing now. She just stared at Adcock.

"I know all this, Ellen, because I called the University of Iowa to confirm that you had graduated from there. A man in the registrar's office said you had, but he also told me that you had transferred three years earlier from the University of Missouri in Columbia. That's a fact you neglected to tell me."

"So I called the registrar's office at the University of Missouri, and a woman found a student directory for 1971 and 1972 and told me what dormitory you'd lived in. Then a woman in the dorm checked her files, which led me to a Ms. Susan Murray in Kansas City."

Her name was Susan Roth when she was your resident assistant in that dormitory." The color drained from Ellen's face. "She said that while you never actually confided in her, she knew from the other girls that you were romantically involved with Mark Roberts that year. Seriously involved."

"That's not true."

"She said that there was trouble from the beginning of the relationship and that your mother frequently came to Columbia to console you. Your roommate told her about walking into the room one time and hearing the word 'abortion' being said before you and your mother noticed she was there. Ms. Murray thinks you transferred to the University of Iowa the next year so you could forget about the whole affair."

"No. You have it all wrong."

"Have I, Ellen? I don't think so. And what it all leads me to is the conclusion that you poisoned Roberts to keep his story from your father once and for all." Ellen shook her head. "Then you did something that must have been horrible for you. You hauled the dead man to a secluded spot on the other side of the county, shot him in the head, and dumped his body in a ditch."

"Some of this is speculation, Ellen, but we'll soon have

plenty of evidence." She stared at him. "We'll have the lab boys compare a strand of your hair with that found on the body. They'll also compare your fingerprints with those on the brandy bottle. Then there's the .22 caliber pistol purchased and registered many years ago by your father. I think we'll find that the bullet came from that gun. I have a search warrant if you force me to use it. And while we're at it, we'll look for the poison. Once we have all this evidence, Ellen, the county attorney will be easy to convince."

"The only thing I'm unsure of is how a small woman like you moved the dead body of a six foot man. You had to have help, but who would have helped you with such a terrible job? The first person who comes to mind is your son Todd."

"No!" she shouted, suddenly finding her voice again. "Not my son! He wasn't even here."

"Then who, Ellen? Who helped you?"

She began to cry.

"There's only one other likely possibility, isn't there? Someone with gray hair to match the hair on the body. Someone who's always there when you need her. The most helpful person in town: Dora Martino."

"No! None of it's true. It didn't happen that way. You're

going to destroy Dora for nothing."

"Not me, Ellen. I didn't ask her to help me conceal a murder. You did it, and you didn't have to. You didn't have to kill him. There were other options. You could have called me. Blackmail is against the law. And your father isn't that naive. He could've survived learning that you had an affair twenty years ago, got pregnant, and had an abortion."

"I didn't!" she screamed. "I didn't have an affair. I didn't get pregnant and have an abortion. It was my mother! My stupid, romantic mother who came down to Columbia to get away from Pitston and my stuffy father. That's who it was, sheriff. Now who's going to tell him?"

Once every four or five years, a woman got arrested in Fox County and had to spend the night in jail. Whenever this happened, Adcock deputized his niece, and she supervised the women's section of the jail until bail was set the next morning. This part of the jail was normally used to store supplies for the various county offices upstairs.

After bringing in Ellen Hughes Roemer and Dora Martino, Adcock and Foley moved the supplies into the hall while the prisoners sat on a bench

and shared a box of Kleenex. Adcock's niece arrived and tried to console Dora, who was trying to console Ellen.

Thomas Hughes had just entered the Clearfield Hospital for observation. Deputy Hunter was about to call Carl Swenson to remind him of the consequences of selling alcoholic beverages to minors. Richard Schneider was back in the Fort Madison Penitentiary for numerous parole violations. His four apprentices had made bail and were already plotting their next crime, unaware of how much safer and easier it would be to get an ordinary job like everyone else.

At five fifteen that afternoon, Adcock and Foley walked out of the courthouse and stood on the steps. "Take a good look at this, Jim," Adcock said, motioning at the town square in general. "Try to remember it. Forty years from now, you'll be amazed at how much it's changed. When you're young you think your little part of the world will stay the same forever, but you soon learn that nothing stays the same."

Foley nodded.

"Clearfield may look then the way Pitston does now," Adcock said. "The taverns will be the last to go. They always are. Maybe you or Kevin will be the Fox County sheriff, or maybe

Fox County won't even exist. The state may combine it into some larger region to save money. When that happens, it'll kill off this town for good."

Foley listened to all this and understood. Sort of. But he was only twenty-two, and he wanted to go see his girlfriend. Adcock knew this. He would've wanted to do the same thing at twenty-two. Tomorrow, Ellen

and Dora would go home, and eventually there would be a trial. They would be found not guilty for some reason or other, or they would be found guilty and receive light sentences. Adcock understood juries, and he understood judges. It would not be his decision, and he didn't have to worry about it. He said goodnight to Foley and went home.

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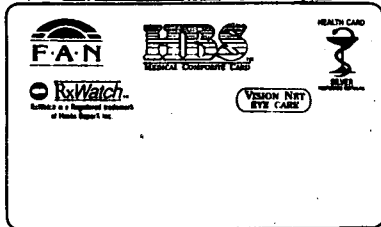


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# Murder Below Broad Street

by Janet O'Daniel

I have felt for some time that I should set down the truth concerning the night of the Historic Homes tour and what happened, if only because Deirdre Dorsette-Byers, my neighbor, has been telling her version all over Charleston and there is often a mile-wide gap between truth and fiction where Deirdre is concerned. Harmony Dupree, who has been with me for thirty years, gives one of those shrugs of hers when I mention telling the truth, saying darkly that truth is a hard bird to catch. But Harmony was raised on one of the offshore islands and thinks she knows a great deal about things the eye can't see. There is even some of the old Gullah in her speech at times, and I will admit she has a formidable sense of things impending. Still, she has a superior way about reminding me of it as I have pointed out to her. We are both widows, Harmony and I, and making the best of it.

"Why not?" I replied when the Historic Homes committee first asked to include my house in the candlelight tour. "My

house is rich in history."

"We're aware of that, Felicia. And very few of the historic homes are still in the same family after so long. I do hope it won't cause your guests any inconvenience."

"My guests," I said firmly, "will adapt."

Due to the pressing need for income, I have converted my home into a bed-and-breakfast. And that is a story in itself—which I will not go into here. The licenses, the permits, the requirements—sprinkler system, fire escapes—and with a Historic Oversight committee peering over my shoulder to make sure it was all done discreetly. Here in Charleston discretion is highly prized. Architectural discretion, that is. Other kinds I imagine run about the same as anywhere.

Deirdre Dorsette-Byers disapproved strongly.

"Strangers tramping through the house. I would find it very demeaning," she said.

I said coldly, "I have strangers in my house all the time, Deirdre. And as far as the tour is concerned, I shall make the

rules—no smoking, no sharp heels—I'm sure everyone will be quite happy to comply."

"But so many out-of-towners," Deirdre said.

"Well now, we can't all be natives," I said, still keeping a note of sweet reason in my voice, and Deirdre did blush slightly. She herself came to Charleston fifteen years ago from Greenville, but to hear her talk you would think she had lived south of Broad Street her whole life. Furthermore, Deirdre's house, which is in the same block as mine, has never been included in a tour. I could have told her the reason: heavy use of wall-to-wall carpeting and plastic laminates when she redecorated the place.

Harmony's disapproval was another matter. She had a premonition from the first that something was wrong about the tour. The fact that Harmony had an irritating way of being right in such things did not keep me from arguing the point with her.

"Perfectly ridiculous," I said.

Harmony spooned sugar into the thick dark coffee in front of her. She had made it fresh, and we were sitting at the kitchen table with one of her rum-flavored cheesecakes on a plate between us.

"What I'm tellin' you is what I seen," she insisted. "If you set

on goin' through with it, what you better do is, you better put out everything you got that's blue. Best color there is for warding off evil. We could use the blue and white china for the refreshments, and you could wear that blue dress of yours."

"It needs to go to the cleaner's," I said, but it disturbed me just a little to hear her talk that way.

"Well then, take it," she persisted.

"And nobody's said anything about refreshments," I pointed out, trying to deflect her.

"Guests in the house gets offered," Harmony said severely, chiding me over amenities forgotten.

"Anyway, I don't see how you can say there's anything evil about this tour when it hasn't happened yet. You don't even know who's going to be coming." I dug into the cheesecake with my fork, some of my anxieties disappearing with the first bite. Harmony and I are neither one of us inclined to worry about our weight. I am a woman of comfortable, large measurements, while Harmony, small, dark-skinned, and wiry, eats just as much but never gains an ounce. However, as I say, I don't worry about it.

"I see somebody with a aura," Harmony said, closing her eyes

and pointing heavenward with her fork.

"Oh, fiddle," I said.

Harmony began a slight back-and-forth rocking motion that she does every once in a while when spirits are moving her.

"Danger comin'," she said.

I went on eating, annoyed but also faintly uneasy, and got ready for Harmony's recital, which was bound to come since I had questioned her credentials, so to speak.

"They passed me over my granddaddy's grave when I was born," Harmony said. "So's Granddaddy's spirit wouldn't come back to plague me. And I always had my window frames painted blue so's the evil hags couldn't get in."

I pointed out to her that none of our window frames were blue. "Nobody's gotten in yet," I said rather testily.

"Roots and spells, ghosts and hexes, I've handled 'em all," Harmony went on, ignoring me. "You get that blue dress to the cleaner, all I got to say."

"It needs to be let out just the teeniest bit at the sides," I admitted.

And two weeks later, on that windy November night when the tour group arrived, I was wearing the blue dress as I greeted them at the front door.

I'd never seen Adam Quin-

elle in person. He was the first to enter—a small, delicate-looking man with little hands and feet—I could look over the top of his head as we shook hands. His wife was taller, a serious, thin-faced woman with dark hair skinned back tightly. Her name was Zoe. Another man was with them. He said his name was Rudy Barlow, and put out a hand to me when we met but didn't smile. He said he was Mr. Quinelle's assistant. Pale, dark, with eyes that darted around restlessly. Assistant my foot, I thought, noticing the curt way Quinelle addressed him. He was a gofer if I ever saw one.

Adam Quinelle was a bona fide celebrity, someone everybody knew about. He was a writer and critic—actually a sort of literary jack-of-all-trades. I'd read articles by him and seen him on television, where he waved his small hands and said acerbic things about other writers. There was a convention of authors and publishers that week at the Mill House, which accounted for his presence as well as that of some of the others, I gathered.

The rest of the tour group crowded in, along with Dulcey Peveridge, the lady from the Historic Homes committee. "This is Mr. Matthias Haver-

hill," Mrs. Peveridge was saying. "One of our foremost Shakespearean scholars."

I shook hands with a lanky middle-aged man with hair falling in front of his eyes. We had candles lighted all over the house, and some of them flickered now as a draft came in the open doorway. It was a cool, cloudy night, and the wind was strong enough to set the live oak in front of the house moving and rustling. The Spanish moss that hung from its branches swayed, gray and shroudlike. The group filling up the entrance hall stopped to sign a guest book I had placed there.

A couple wearing matching Hush Puppies were identified as Mr. and Mrs. Wilford Gunther of Grand Rapids, Michigan. They seemed to be unconnected with the literary convention. I greeted them, and Mrs. Gunther whispered excitedly in my ear, "I saw that man on Johnny Carson!"

I managed to smile and nod at her, but I was faintly disturbed at this celebrity atmosphere that was building. I would have preferred the focus of attention to be on the house, which was, after all, the object of the occasion.

"And this is Mr. Wyman Holcroft," Mrs. Peveridge murmured. "He's a reporter."

"A local reporter?" I asked, eyebrows going up. Mr. Holcroft was young, with a shock of dark hair that looked uncombed. He wore a corduroy jacket, jeans, and Reeboks, and there was a camera around his neck.

"I'm from *Currents* magazine," he said. "I like your house."

"Thank you," I said coolly. I had heard of *Currents*, a big national weekly, but I was of two minds about just how much I relished this sort of notoriety. Obviously his interest stemmed from the guest roster for tonight's tour, not from the architectural significance of my house. It would, of course, kill Deirdre Dorsette-Byers when she heard about it. That at least was a comforting thought.

A gray-haired man named Hugh Merrifield was the last to enter. He identified himself as a writer working on a book about the South's historic houses. (*Another one?* I thought, but didn't say.)

It was right about then, with everyone assembled in my front hall, that I began to worry less about the publicity, which I detested, and began instead to be aware of another element that seemed to have entered with the group. There was a certain—how to put it without sounding like Harmony—a cer-

tain uneasiness among all of them. No one joked or smiled or looked cheerful—with the possible exception of little Mrs. Gunther from Grand Rapids, who, I suspected, would have bubbled happily at a tax audit.

It was Adam Quinelle, however, who remained the focal point of the group as the tour started, and I was obliged to admit he seemed knowledgeable.

"You see here, my dear," he said to his wife, but his voice was clear enough that it carried to the whole group, "heart pine floors. The stair rail is mahogany, of course."

I raised my own voice slightly to cut him off. "This house was built in 1769 by an ancestor of mine, Captain Emmanuel Leighton, a prominent merchant. He had a thriving store in Augusta, where goods from Britain were sold, and there he received skins coming in from the West and sent them on to England. At this time the Cherokee country was opening up, due in large part to the vigor of such early traders as Captain Leighton—"

"Those old pirates really cleaned up in the fur trade," Adam Quinelle said, his voice at an easy conversational level, not even lowered for discretion. I glared at him and continued.

"On this floor, behind the en-

trance hall, two small rooms were made into one, which serves as a dining room. The rooms to right and left here are smaller and now function as guest bedrooms."

"No living room?" Mrs. Gunther asked in some bewilderment.

"The *drawing* room is on the next floor," I said. "We'll get to that in a moment. First, if you all will step back this way, please. The dining room paneling extends to chair-rail height, as you see. Incidentally, the house was one of the first in Charleston to be piped for gaslights. These handsome crystal chandeliers are from that era."

"May I take a picture?" Wyman Holcroft whispered as the group made its way around the room.

I frowned. "Well, I suppose—" I said, and watched as he snapped from various angles. I noted that he managed to include Adam Quinelle in most of the shots. I suppose Quinelle was what would be called newsworthy.

"May not use any of them," Holcroft said cheerfully, "but it never hurts to have more material than you need. My magazine's into distinguished homes this year."

"I see." Again I had the uneasy feeling that the evening was not entirely in my control,

and seeing Harmony standing in the kitchen doorway, starched and rigid, glowering at the proceedings, was in no way reassuring.

"The house is built on a crib of palmetto logs sunk in sand and pluff mud," I went on, "thus enabling it to sway slightly in high winds. It escaped serious injury in the great earthquake of 1886 and again in the recent hurricane. You may recall this principle's being employed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Tokyo hotel that withstood the disastrous earthquake of 1923 . . ."

As I went on talking, I was observing the group, singly and collectively. Mr. Merrifield, the author who was doing the book on southern houses, had sidled up to Holcroft, and I heard him murmur, "I wonder if I could possibly see some of your pictures when they're developed? I'd give credit, of course—I came along at the last minute, actually—didn't know cameras would be permitted." I didn't hear Holcroft's reply.

The Gunthers were tiptoeing along in their Hush Puppies, taking in everything, sticking close together, but as awed by the Quinelles as by the house, I thought. Anyone seen on television was by definition famous, I supposed. I myself seldom watch television.

Quinelle strolled around the room followed by his wife and Rudy Barlow. He had a great tendency, I noticed, to touch everything, to pick up objects and examine them, to run his small hands over furniture and along the top of the chair-high paneling.

"The cornice—" I began, and Quinelle chimed in, "Ah, yes. Look there, Zoe. Notice the rosettes and the egg-and-dart carvings. Excellent examples of the form."

My mouth clamped shut with annoyance, and I was about to herd them all out of the room summarily when I noticed the two who followed in Quinelle's wake—Zoe and Rudy. They were standing very close together and the backs of their hands were touching. As I watched, I saw her hand move slightly, not to pull away, but in an unmistakable stroking motion. A second later the group shifted, and they stepped apart.

I turned and caught Harmony's glance, knowing in an instant that she had seen it, too. Very little escapes Harmony.

"Now, if you'll all step this way," I said, leading them back into the big front hall. "The house may be said to be a mixture of periods, but the Adam style is perhaps predominant.

You will notice the carved woodwork and cornices, and the graceful curve of the stair rail, which is indeed mahogany." I shot a look at Quinelle, who, standing on the bottom step, was still shorter than the other men in the group.

"If you'll follow me to the second floor," I said, brushing past him to go ahead.

I noticed Matthias Haverhill, the Shakespeare scholar, edging his way to Quinelle, and as we went up the steps I heard him say in a low voice, "Look here, Quinelle, do you actually plan to deliver that paper?"

"Certainly." Quinelle's voice, as always, was not lowered but at normal volume. "The verse is doggerel, pure and simple. If you're going to claim discovery of a lost Shakespeare fragment, you'd better be prepared to back it up."

"But I am! At the Bodleian, where I found it—"

"Piffle!" Quinelle snorted. "Rubbish! You never should have announced it to the newspapers anyway. Too quick off the mark, Haverhill. Too damned eager."

I turned slightly as we reached the top of the stairs, just enough to catch a glimpse of Haverhill's thin, ascetic features. They were twisted into a dark look of pure venom as he glared at Quinelle.

Hurriedly I said, "The drawing room opens here, off the hall, and runs the entire width of the house, behind the piazza. Please note the wide beveled cypress panels. The original wood mantel over the fireplace was replaced sometime in the early 1800's by a marble one with carvings of grapes and grape leaves."

I could hear little Mrs. Gunther's voice. "Oh, Wilford, look. Did you *ever* see anything so beautiful?" But it was Adam Quinelle I kept my eye on. Once again he was touching, lifting, examining, running those little monkey-clever hands over everything. I think he really was interested, which was more than could be said for his wife Zoe and the gofer, Rudy, both of whom looked supremely bored, but even so I disliked watching him do it. Furthermore, here on the second floor the group seemed to be drifting apart, some going here, some there, some lingering in the hall looking at the portraits, some poking into the morning room across the hall. Mrs. Peveridge from the Historic Homes committee should have been alert to this, keeping them together, but she was in deep conversation with Hugh Merrifield, no doubt hoping to find herself quoted in his book. I have known Dulcey Peveridge since

first grade and have never found her to be more than minimally intelligent.

"The house has seen a great deal of history," I pushed on. "There has been speculation that 'old Bory,' as General Beauregard was affectionately known, may have stayed here briefly before moving on to other quarters on Meeting Street. Later, of course, he was obliged to move farther uptown, beyond the range of the federal guns."

"General Who?" Mrs. Gunther asked in a timid voice.

"General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard," I said severely. "The defender of Charleston, he is often called."

"Oh." Mrs. Gunther looked suitably cowed.

I forged ahead. "Curiously, it is the house's earlier history that is better authenticated. Hessian mercenaries were quartered here during the Revolution. When the British were ordered to leave Charleston Harbor, many of the Hessians fled inland. But some, including a few quartered here, hid in the chimneys and other niches and bolt-holes in the house to escape the general roundup."

I glanced around the group, feeling I had their attention now. Even Adam Quinelle was silent for once, giving me his peculiar half-whimsical look.

"We know much of this from the letters of Sarah Boltman Bennett," I went on. "A daughter of the house. Old Captain Leighton's granddaughter. In them she speaks of an 'attachment' one of the Hessians had formed for her. She implies that the interest was returned."

"Did he make it?" Hugh Merrifield, the house historian, asked. "Did he escape the roundup?"

"Apparently. But the story did not have a happy ending, even so. Sarah's marriage to a local merchant—some years older, by the way—had been arranged, and she was obligated by her family to go through with it."

Little Mrs. Gunther's lower lip was trembling. "What a dreadful, beautiful story," she murmured. And then, more practically, "Where on earth did he hide?"

"Perhaps in this chimney," I said. "We can only surmise." I knew, of course, but I wasn't going to tell *them*. Certain matters should be kept within the family, I thought.

There was a collective sigh as the group started to move again, and I said briskly, "Suppose we step across to the morning room. It was there that old Captain Leighton used to sit to cast up his accounts. Later it



was used as a ladies' writing room, where invitations were written and correspondence answered."

Adam Quinelle's voice returned. "Just see the texture of this paneling. See that beveling? And done with hand tools, of course—but there were master craftsmen at work then." Once again he was running his hands over things, touching, examining, handling.

"This way," I said smartly and headed across the hall.

The smaller morning room was a tactile feast for him. The desk, covered with paperweights, inkstand, lamp, books, water jug, attracted him at once. Everything was lifted, stroked, turned upside down. Then the leatherbound books in cases against one wall were scrutinized, his hands running over their spines with what looked like sensuous pleasure. When he discovered Captain Leighton's huge sea chest standing in a corner, he let out a little cry that was almost girlish and clapped his hands together.

"Oh, but this is *marvelous!*" he crowed, and proceeded at once to lift the cover for a closer look. The chest was empty, but Quinelle ran his hands over every surface, exclaiming over the workmanship, touching the leather hinges and straps. With

everyone watching him, I thought much of his pleasure derived from being the focus of attention. I was torn between annoyance with him and a certain satisfaction at having the house so thoroughly appreciated.

I let them all soak in the atmosphere of the little room, then explained that the other rooms on this floor were bedrooms, and private, but that if they would follow me, we would go up into the attic for a look at the huge pine beams, iron nails, wooden pegs, and dowels that held the house together. Mr. Merrifield showed a great interest in this, and was at my side asking questions the whole way.

"Magnificent!" he exclaimed. "And the mahogany stair rail goes all the way up—God, how they built things in those days!"

Wyman Holcroft was busy with his notebook and camera, and the others wandered about peering into every corner. The attic seemed to fascinate them, and I might have had a hard time getting them to leave but for the fragrance of Harmony's coffee, which had begun seeping upstairs. Then there was a general breaking up of the group. The Gunthers were half-way down the stairs before anyone else, and even dour Mr. Ha-

verhill moved more briskly. I began to feel some gratification that the thing had gone off well and that the house had been a memorable experience for all of them.

Harmony, who wasn't above a little showing off, had done herself proud, using the good silver coffeepot and laying out an assortment of her specialties—an apricot mousse, a lemon cheesecake, and a hazelnut torte. She was using the blue and white china. There was a clatter of conversation around the dining room, everyone becoming more at ease with each other, the earlier glumness dissipating, and then all of a sudden I heard Zoe's voice, high and querulous.

"Where's Quinelle?"

The room grew quiet as people looked around.

Lean and scholarly Matthias Haverhill paused in mid-bite, then began to chew slowly on his lemon cheesecake, eyes darting. Wyman Holcroft's head shot up as he searched the room with a reporter's probing look. Hugh Merrifield glanced up casually, not overly concerned. Mr. and Mrs. Wilford Gunther grew wide-eyed, and Dulcey Peveridge cleared her throat nervously. It was Zoe and Rudy Barlow I looked at. Their hands shot out and clasped each other for an in-

stant, then let go. "Damn!" Zoe said, sounding exasperated. "Has he done it again?"

"Done what?" I inquired. I glanced at Harmony, just coming in from the kitchen with a tray of benne cakes. She paused in the doorway and shot me a stiletto look.

Zoe rolled her eyes up, then took a deep breath. "He's done a bolt. He's *always* doing that. Ducking out and leaving everybody behind. Mrs. Delavan, I do apologize."

"It's quite all right," I said calmly. "Please, everyone, have some more coffee. Mr. Merrifield, won't you try one of Harmony's benne cakes? They're a Charleston specialty."

Movement resumed, conversation picked up, but in a muted undertone. And Zoe Quinelle, angry and white-faced, more disturbed, I thought, than the situation warranted, set her cup and saucer down with a clank.

"Hey, take it easy, honey," Rudy Barlow said in a low voice that I was near enough to hear.

But Zoe was still angry, and over Dulcey Peveridge's anxious protests announced that she was leaving. The others were to stay, please. Rudy had his car. No need to rush because of her. She shook her hand in a distracted way, and the two of them left.



I SWITCHED ON A SMALL LAMP AND LOOKED AROUND.

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The rest stayed only long enough for second helpings of the refreshments and then at last they were gone and Harmony and I cleared up, filled the dishwasher, and changed the tablecloth to be ready for serving breakfast. Our guests returned from their evening out—two couples from New Jersey who had stayed with me before in the first floor bedrooms—and we exchanged a few words before all of us turned in.

I was sitting up in bed reading and just starting to feel sleepy after a rather curious keyed-up mood when the telephone beside my bed rang.

"Mrs. Delavan? Wyman Holcroft."

"Oh. Yes, Mr. Holcroft?"

"I'm at the Mills House. I've been covering the conference here, and Norman Mailer was supposed to be coming in tonight but he seems to be a no-show. Mrs. Delavan, have you seen anything of Adam Quinelle? I mean—he didn't come back there, I suppose?"

"No—isn't he at the hotel?"

"Doesn't seem to be. His wife says he often walks back from parties and things, all by himself. Which really steams her, but now she's running around looking for him and she's even called the police."

"Well, he certainly didn't

come back here." I hesitated. "Are the others there? The ones attending the conference? Mr. Haverhill, Mr. Merrifield?"

"I don't know. Haven't thought to ask."

"You might check on them," I said slowly, and we hung up. I felt a curious churning inside—such a busy, jumbled evening it had been, so outside the normal quiet that Harmony and I shared day after day. But in spite of it, I was tired, and I knew Harmony was, too, although her back had been straight as a poker as she headed for her own bedroom downstairs off the kitchen. I had often suggested that she take the bedroom next to mine on the upper floor, but she always insisted she disliked the idea of sleeping that high off the ground.

I rather wished tonight that she were there next door to me. I tossed around uneasily for a few minutes, but then at last I dropped off to sleep, much like falling off a cliff. Complete darkness, total oblivion.

When I awoke, it was a sudden thing, and at first unexplainable. There had been no noise, and I didn't have to go to the bathroom, so those two causes could be ruled out. But as I lay staring in darkness at the ceiling, my thoughts began to eddy around in a dark, pool-

ing spiral, disturbing me.

Presently I got out of bed, feeling the November chill of the room and pulling on my warm dressing gown, locating my slippers. I tiptoed out of my room and down the hall to the morning room. I stepped inside, feeling my heart beating insanely against the walls of my chest. I tried my best to breathe deeply and control it, but it seemed to be spinning off with a life of its own, quite apart from me.

I switched on a small lamp and looked around. The desk with its pens and inkstand and paperweights seemed in order. Captain Leighton's sea chest stood in its corner. Books were lined up, row on row, against the wall. I took a deep breath and went over to the shelves, removing two books at eye level and finding the small wooden handle concealed there. I pulled it, and a door built into the bookshelves swung open.

The space behind the shelves was small—scarcely closet-sized. Captain Leighton, who had apparently delighted in tricks and whims, had had it built for no better reason than to store some of his choice wines, and it hadn't been used for that in years. It was quite adequate, however, for holding the doubled-up body of Adam Quinelle.

Soft footsteps sounded behind me, and I whirled around.

"What's goin' on?"

Harmony stood there, dressed much as I was in nightgown and wrapper, only her slippers were large yellow fluffy ones with cat faces on the toes.

"Harmony—" I, so seldom at a loss for words, was speechless.

She moved closer to look, in the low lamplight, at the body in the tiny space.

"Is he dead?" she asked practically.

"I'm sure he is," I said. I reached out and touched the cold, lifeless body, avoiding the blood that had dripped from an obvious wound. I drew my hand back quickly.

"One of them did it," Harmony said. "One of them that was here tonight."

"It had to be."

"Told you I saw somebody with a aura," she said, shaking her head. "And the way they went after that apricot mousse of mine, too." She pondered over this non sequitur for a moment. I felt my hands and feet turning to ice.

"Somebody hit him on the back of the head," I said.

"But when? When they have time to do that?"

I shook my head helplessly. Then it came to me.

"When we all went to the attic."

"But if you was all in the attic—"

"Well, but maybe we weren't. I mean, not all at once. People were coming and going—I didn't pay attention to who was there at any particular time. And we must have stayed up there ten minutes—maybe fifteen. I didn't see Quinelle, though, I'm sure of that."

I pulled myself up and tried to still the trembling that had overtaken me. I disliked this feeling of being so out of control.

"I'll have to phone the police. And then we must try to remember things. I mean, things that might mean something." I thought of Zoe Quinelle and Rudy Barlow, their hands touching down in the dining room—and of the way those hands had flown out to clasp each other later. I recalled the look of venomous hatred on Matthias Haverhill's gaunt face. *Look here, Quinelle, do you actually plan to deliver that paper?* If a man's professional reputation were at stake, if he knew Quinelle was about to pinion him with that sharp, ruthless wit—

"You don't suppose," Harmony said thoughtfully, and then paused.

"Suppose what?"

"Well, it happened in this room, didn't it?" she said. "Do you reckon somebody might've found . . ." She let the thought trail off.

"Yes. I did think about that." I stopped suddenly as a board creaked in the hall outside.

Both of us whirled around, and I heard an odd, gasping sound which I realized was coming from me. Framed in the doorway were Mr. and Mrs. Wilford Gunther of Grand Rapids. Only the Hush Puppies and polyester were gone, along with the ingenuous, wide-eyed wonder. Both were dressed in black. Close-fitting pants and sweaters, knitted caps, and smooth black leather gloves.

Mr. Gunther was holding a gun. It too was black.

"All right now, ladies, just move aside quietly," he said. "We don't plan to hurt anyone."

"You've already hurt someone," I said.

"Yes. Well. That little fellow was too sharp for his own good. He saw it at the same time we did. Even so, we'd have had it in a minute if he hadn't started to raise the roof. Loud voice, for a little guy. Wouldn't have had to hit him if he'd just kept his mouth shut. Wouldn't have had to come back tonight. He brought it all on himself. Get it, Tessa."

The woman slipped past me

to Captain Leighton's sea chest, opened it, and examined the inside of the lid quickly.

"It's gone!" she cried out.

Annoyance and then anger flashed across his face.

"What the hell—" He turned on the two of us—Harmony in the shadows against the wall, me backed up to the desk, and glared at each of us in turn.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, and I was pleased to note that my voice had returned to normal and my heart had stopped its pounding. I was feeling quite calm.

"Where is it?" he rasped again.

I closed my lips firmly and looked at Harmony, who returned the look and nodded very faintly. Two people do not share a home for thirty years without learning to read one another's thoughts. Wiry and quick, she bent over and in a flash gave a yank to the narrow rug he was standing on—Captain Leighton's India drugget. It slid on the polished floor. Off balance, the man toppled toward the desk and flung a hand out to catch himself. I gave a sharp chop to the hand at the same time that I seized a heavy glass paperweight and flung it at the woman. It struck her temple and she went down. Harmony was already busy

flinging the rug over the man, winding him up as neatly as a fly being saved for lunch by a spider.

"Well done, Harmony," I gasped. "I'll call the police."

Harmony was out of breath herself. "He's the one with the aura," she announced, looking at the man on the floor.

As it turned out, no call was necessary, for the police were at the door along with young Mr. Holcroft.

"Hurry, hurry," I urged as I admitted them, and they were up the stairs in seconds. Wyman Holcroft lingered behind for a moment.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. "I just had a hunch something was doing here. That's what I told the cops."

"I am so grateful for your hunch, Mr. Holcroft," I breathed, adjusting my robe and patting my hair back into place. "And I'm perfectly fine." I hesitated. "I'm afraid Mr. Quinelle—is not."

"What were they after?" the detective asked me a half hour later. By now my house was buzzing with police, both uniformed and plainclothes. My guests from New Jersey were wandering around, bewildered but also bright-eyed with excitement. We were standing in the dining room, and Mr. Hol-



croft's pencil was scribbling rapidly; he had already asked to use my telephone.

I took a deep breath. "They were after a book that is often referred to as the Hessian Diary. Its reputation is well known among collectors."

The detective, a tall black man with a look of experience about him, asked, "It's valuable, I take it?"

"It is," I said. "I'm sure it would bring a great deal of money."

"And where is it now?"

"Upstairs, in my bedside table. I didn't like the way Mr. Quinelle was touching everything, so after everyone had left, I checked on the diary to be sure it was all right and then I took it into my room just because I wanted to look at it, have it near me. I do that often. I never dreamed those Gunthers—or whoever they are—had discovered it."

"Professionals," he said crisply. "We know them. And murder isn't their usual way. But Quinelle was clever enough to catch them out as they tried to lift it."

"What brought them here?" I asked. "How did they know about the diary?"

"There's a lively underground in such matters," Holcroft said, rejoining us. "My magazine did a piece on it re-

cently. Some wealthy collector probably put the word out that he'd give a hefty price for the diary. And those two must be among the best in the business. That hick act they were putting on would have fooled anyone."

"Surely no reputable dealer—"

"Oh no. Nothing like that," the detective interrupted. "But some collectors deal directly with art and antiquity thieves. They do just that—collect. Stash the stuff in air-conditioned vaults and never show it to anybody."

"But they *have* it," Holcroft said. "That's all they care about."

"How did those two get back in here tonight?" I asked suddenly.

"Probably slipped the lock off one of these dining room windows when we were all having refreshments," he said. "No one would have noticed."

I could feel Harmony's gimlet stare and purposely ignored it. But I knew well enough that the question of blue window frames would be raised again.

"That Hessian soldier who stayed here—the one who fell for, what was her name, Sarah Boltman Bennett. It was his diary, wasn't it?" Wyman Holcroft asked.

"It was, yes," I said.

He tilted his head to one side.



"How come you never sold it yourself? To a reputable collector, I mean—or a museum."

"It was a family treasure," I said, and to me that explained it. But I saw his faint frown as if he were puzzled.

"I mean—it belongs in the house," I went on. "And right where he hid it—in the false lid of Captain Leighton's sea chest. I can picture him sticking it in there before he hid himself in the little wine closet. I'm sure that's what he did."

"But you said he escaped. Yet he didn't take the diary with him."

"Oh no. I think he left it there on purpose. Hoping, perhaps, that she'd find it. Sarah, you know. I like to think perhaps she did, although I don't know if she could have read it. It's all in German, of course."

"I was just thinking—that money might've come in handy, though," he said.

I gave him a severe look. "Mr. Holcroft, this is Charleston. We don't just toss away our treasures."

He stared at me for a moment and then grinned. "No, ma'am, you sure don't. I just didn't think."

But mentioning Charleston

suddenly made *me* think. I glanced across at Harmony, and she nodded and started for the kitchen. In no time at all I could smell the coffee, and she was bringing out the leftovers from earlier in the evening—along with some pistachio-cream eclairs she'd been holding back—setting out cups and saucers and plates. Everyone was milling around, the detective, the uniformed officers, the medical examiner, the four bewildered guests from New Jersey, Harmony and I in our robes and slippers. Poor Adam Quinelle had already been carried out and spirited away somewhere; and so had the Gunthers.

"My goodness," I said. "I don't know where my manners are. I just want you all to come in here and have a little refreshment before you go. Detective, what was your name, Hammond? Detective Hammond, now please have yourself a nice fresh cup of coffee. And you other folks, just come right over to the table. Mr. Holcroft, you've been up and working all night. I'm sure you've got room for a little something..."

That's the way we do things in Charleston.

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# The Thousand Toes of Bliss

by Dan Crawford

**G**loria was more flabby than really fat, and it took unkindness to call her ugly, exactly. She had rather lifeless grey eyes, stringy red hair, and that complexion that manages to look very white without looking quite clean. She had managed to look presentable, anyhow, in her high school graduation picture.

But she was not the catch of the year, and she knew it. Gloria never went along to those roller skating parties at the Cue; there were no steamy encounters after hours in the high school parking lot, that gravel bit that could be seen from the street. She used to stop for a while, walking home from her job at the hotel, and peer through the window at Hughes. Shimmering wedding dresses hung there on mannequins who, headless, were doing better than she was.

It wasn't that Gloria was in a hurry to marry and settle down. But she did want to have something to settle down from.

A guy who'd take her out for a hamburger would do: she was willing to go dutch. But when she allowed herself to fantasize, there was Sam. Sam was a big, square Lutheran who worked out at the lumberyard, with his shirt unbuttoned down to here to show the curls on his chest. He did a lot of heavy lifting. Gloria had no real business at the lumberyard, but there was no law against browsing. She might decide to put a new room on the house, after all, if she ever had a house.

Sam was no blockhead, for all he worked with lumber. He knew who she was, and he knew what she kept coming around to see. And Gloria knew he knew this, just as she also knew he had lots better things to do. She'd see him at night all the time, driving off to some secluded spot with some other woman in his Mustang. And she couldn't blame him; blue eyes that gorgeous couldn't be blind, you know.

So she went on taking long walks and cold showers, and dropping up to the lumberyard once or twice a week to run her hands over sashes and doors.

Gloria's long walks generally took her past the Cue, or Hughes, or the high school, or any of a dozen places she and Sam could have gone together. So her mental state at the end of a walk was very little better than when she started. One night she stood on the bridge, watching the sun set in the river. Really romantic for two, holding hands on the bridge, but dividing the number of people in half broke the pleasure into useless fractions. The sun vanished, her eyes narrowed, her face grew hard.

Finally a freckled fist hammered on the concrete rail. "God," she moaned, "couldn't you give him to me for just an hour?"

"Tell you what," said a voice behind her. "If He doesn't answer, maybe we can talk terms."

Gloria'd thought she was alone. She looked up into a face that made her take three steps back.

The woman was gorgeous, with lustrous black hair and great black eyes just a little slanted. Her gown was like something Gloria'd seen only on TV, and fit her like water running down a mermaid. Her long nails were red, as were her eyebrows, the hoops that hung from her ears, and the tail that stuck out the back of the dress.

Gloria took another step back. "You're . . . you're not . . ."

"I am, though." The woman's voice was like butter on corn. "I just go around in male form when I'm slumming."

Gloria had an idea she should be running right now, but Satan stood between her and home and, anyhow, she was curious. "What did you mean about . . . terms?"

"I thought if you wanted your Sam for more than an hour, I'd let you have him," the woman replied, her tail waving lazily back and forth. "But if an hour's all you need, I really have better things to be doing."

Gloria's eyes, which had gone wide, now became slits. "What would I have to do in return?"

Satan lowered her eyelids. "Nothing."

"Nothing? Why?"

Satan turned around as if to walk away. Gloria hated her firm back and high buttocks. "I just need to do a few favors, that's all." Satan looked back over one perfect shoulder. "Business has been bad for me in Iowa, and this would be a way for me to get back on schedule in Delaware County."

"You mean," Gloria began, "you can . . ."

Satan put her hands on her hips and jerked her head back. Gloria

blinked. And Sam stood between them, his eyes pointed straight ahead, across the bridge. He wore that lumberyard shirt and those old jeans that looked as if they might come apart any second if a lady was lucky.

Gloria took a deep breath. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. What do you say?"

What Gloria might have said was cut off by the sound of an approaching automobile. A yellow Mustang convertible pulled up the hill to the bridge, carrying Sam and his latest blonde, Josephine.

Gloria looked from the car to the Sam before her. "I . . ."

"This has to be His doing," growled Satan. "I never said it would be the real Sam. But if that's going to be a problem . . ."

She nodded, and the Mustang jerked to a stop. Sam floated out of the driver's seat. Josephine screamed and jumped out of the car, the first time she had ever had to walk home.

Gloria looked back at Satan and found two Sams standing before her, in the same shorts and jeans. "It was a trick!" she exclaimed. "That phony Sam would've taken my soul to Hell!"

"Well, yeah," said Satan. "That's business. But I'll give you a sporting chance." One elegant hand stretched toward the Sams. "Now, my Sam will give you a few good nights, and then lead you such a dreadful life you'll go mad and kill yourself. But if you choose the real Sam, of course, he won't be under any obligation to have anything to do with you at all."

She turned to face Gloria, a warm smile spreading up perfect cheeks. "So take your pick: a few nights with Sam, then hell on Earth and Hell after, or maybe nothing at all. You take one and I'll take the other."

Gloria looked from Satan to the Sams. "You mean if I choose yours . . ."

"I'll take yours." Satan licked her lips.

That was no choice at all. The wrong Sam would mean damnation for two, then. But which Sam was the real Sam? Gloria looked them up and down, but detected no flaws. Both those sturdy forms made her shoulders hang limp and her knees tremble.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, gathering strength for "eeny meeny."

Her eyes popped open. Then she closed them again. She took the next breath all with her nose, her nostrils flaring. Sam on the left smelled of sweat. Sam on the right smelled of nothing at all.

Gloria put out her hand. "Th-that one," she said, indicating Sam on the left.

Satan's perfect nose wrinkled. "Oh, very well. Let's go." And she was gone, taking with her Sam on the right.

The remaining Sam jerked a little, and then turned his head left and right. His head pulled back between his shoulders. "Did I just see what I thought I saw?"

"I guess." Gloria looked into the big blue eyes and turned away. She had a shower to take.

A hand caught at hers. "There's a lot more to you than ever I guessed," said Sam. His free hand gestured to the Mustang still sitting on the bridge. "You, er, need a ride someplace?"

Gloria took another deep breath. "I'll take a ride."

Sam led her forward. "I know the place."

It happened, some years later, that Satan passed through town again, on the way to pick up some souls in nearby Ryan. As she sauntered past the Manchester Pharmacy, she felt a tug on her tail.

Gloria had lost a few pounds, but on her this looked bad. She had rings around her eyes that hadn't been there before. Behind her, in a fourth-hand station wagon parked at the curb, four children were shrieking at her, "Mommy! I didn't do it!"

"That Sam," she rasped, "is just about to drive me crazy. You could've had the decency to tell me I picked the fake one."

Satan smiled. There was the slightest hint of sympathy on her lips. "And so I would have," she said, "if you'd chosen that one."

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# Your Law, Our Land

by William T. Lowe

**R**ory Horn hugged the trunk of the birch tree and wished he could make himself invisible. The top branches were still swaying from his rapid climb; if either of the two men looking for him glanced up, he would be seen.

And probably shot. Rory was certain he had just seen a load of illegal firearms being smuggled into Canada. He was also sure any witnesses would be extremely unwelcome.

The men on the ground below were both white, both armed with Israeli-made Uzi weapons, both dressed in brown uniforms. They followed the faint trail to the river's edge, searching the low underbrush, watching for a boat on the water.

They retraced their steps and paused under the clump of birch and pine.

"Where'd the bastard go?"

"Damn Indians. Always snoopin' around."

"You think he saw anything?"

"Nah. I spotted him as soon as he showed up. He split when I yelled out."

"We can't take chances. You

go that way and meet me back at the truck. And put the gun away; remember we're on an Indian reservation."

With a sigh of relief, Rory watched the two men disappear through the brush. He remembered the meeting that afternoon in Chief Harry Blackwell's office.

"Firearms are funneling through the New York side of the reservation into Canada, and we don't know how the shipments are being made." The speaker was grim-faced as he looked around the table.

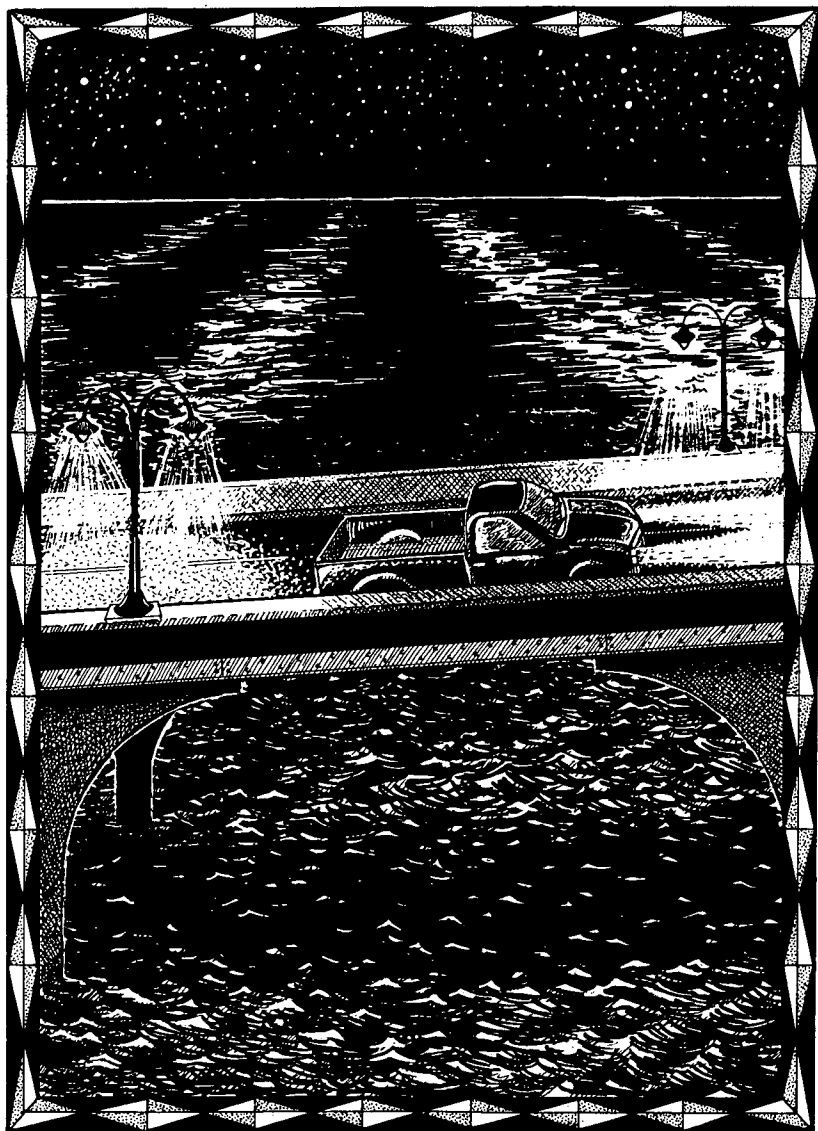
"How do you know the arms are going through our territory?" asked Chief Blackwell.

"Our intelligence gives us that much, but that's all we've got."

"This contraband, what exactly is it?"

"Big ticket items. Assault rifles. Grenades. Anti-tank missiles, probably surplus from the Gulf." The speaker was Art Bowers, field agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

This meeting was supposed to be about fishing violations in



IT WAS LATE WHEN RORY HEADED HIS LITTLE PICKUP OVER THE BRIDGE  
FROM THE ISLAND AND STARTED FOR HOGANSBURG.

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the St. Lawrence. Rory was there to give a status report on the pollution cleanup operation by the EPA and the New York DEC. Non-natives were encroaching on Mohawk fishing areas. The Akwesasne Mohawk Police didn't have the manpower to enforce the laws; the tribal council had to appeal for cooperation from the Canadian authorities.

At the table was a uniformed sergeant of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, another from the Ontario Provincial Police, a man in plainclothes from the Sûreté du Québec. Bowers of the ATF and Farley of the FBI had turned up at the last minute, and Chief Blackwell had permitted them to sit in.

Art Bowers had asked to speak. He was in his late thirties with glasses and thinning hair and the beginning of a paunch. To Rory he looked more like an accountant than a field agent.

"The word we get is that the Warriors are stockpiling a lot of armament," Bowers said, "as if they didn't have enough firepower already."

Chief Blackwell interrupted. "We don't need that kind of gossip," he said sharply. "If you get any proof of that, Mr. Bowers, you bring it to me."

Art Bowers shrugged and sat down. Rory saw the look he

gave Farley, a look that said "dumb Indians." It was the superior attitude of some white men, and Rory resented it.

John Farley said, "We've been stopping every truck and trailer and camper that comes on the reservation. But so far no luck."

"It's been bad for business," Chief Blackwell said, "but we haven't objected."

"Sorry, chief," Farley said. "I hope none of your people are involved in this, Chief Blackwell. You've had enough on your plate these past few months."

Rory knew what he meant. There had been internal clashes in the tribe between pro- and anti-gambling factions. There had been gunfire, deaths. The papers called it the "gambling wars" and labeled the Warriors militant hot-heads. The tribe didn't need any more negative publicity. The meeting went on; the Canadian representatives promised cooperation.

When the men were out of sight, Rory slid to the ground. He had the classic Mohawk profile, the strong nose, the heavy chin. He wore his black hair long, caught at the back of his neck with a short blue ribbon. While it was common to see Indian men with blue eyes, Rory's eyes were a somber brown.



He did not follow the path but worked his way along the river bank. It was late spring, and a horde of black flies followed him. This was Cornwall Island, the largest island in the St. Lawrence, the river that marked the boundary between the U.S. and Canada. The river flowed through the center of the Mohawk reservation near Massena, New York. The Akwesasne Indians were on the state side, the St. Regis on the Canadian side.

A community of Indian families lived on the island with their schools and churches, but there were stretches of undeveloped land that were isolated and empty.

Rory had left his truck parked near a trailer that served as a field headquarters for the DEC and EPA engineers engaged in taking soil and water samples. Rory had majored in environmental science; now he represented the tribe in the pollution cleanup studies.

"Every truck, every trailer, every camper," John Farley had said. Rory had followed a hunch that afternoon after the meeting, and blind luck had paid off. Now he knew how the contraband firearms were being handled. But before he could tell anyone, he had to get off the island.

Up ahead he heard a car engine start. Lying prone on a slight rise, he parted strands of high grass and peered through them. The two vehicles he had seen earlier were moving out. The men had given up their search for him. Rory rose and began trotting toward the area where his Ranger was parked.

He wondered whom he should tell about what he had seen. There were many law enforcement agencies involved. There was nothing new about smuggling along the U.S./Canadian border. It could be cigarettes, narcotics, firearms, even illegal aliens from Europe. Most of it was concentrated farther east in the Swanton sector at the Champlain border crossing. There the agents had to contend with a heavily traveled interstate that ran from Albany to Montreal. And there was the Amtrak railroad, and even the boat traffic on Lake Champlain. All saw their share of smuggling activity.

Rory decided to tell Uncle Mark what he had seen. Mark Benjamin had been a friend of his father's. He was a senior agent with the New York State Bureau of Criminal Investigation. His office was in Syracuse.

He would tell Mark, and Mark could tell whomever he chose. Mark knew that any publicity linking Mohawks

with anything illegal would be especially bad now. Legislation favorable to the Mohawks was pending in the statehouse down in Albany. Bad publicity could kill it.

It was late when Rory headed his little pickup over the bridge from the island and started for Hogansburg. In the western sky he could see the lofty St. Lawrence International Bridge. Lights were beginning to twinkle along the length of the span that linked the two countries.

It was full dark when he drove up Memorial Street to St. Regis Road and headed for Main Street. He passed a shop with a big sign that read WELCOME TO AKWESASNE—LAND WHERE THE PARTRIDGE DRUMS.

There was little traffic. Here and there at intersections he saw the dark blue state police cars parked with their lights off. The troopers and the Canadian provincial police had maintained a presence on the reservation since the armed conflicts months ago. The Warriors resented it deeply as an insult and an intrusion.

Light spilled from Billy's Bingo Hall, but most of Main Street was deserted, the big casinos standing dark and silent, their employees out of work and restless.

Rory stopped at the Bear's

Den, a complex of stores, a restaurant, and a service station. A few late tourists were there, filling up with tax-free gasoline and buying tax-free cigarettes.

"I'm looking for Jake Hightower," Rory told one of the attendants. He mentioned his name and turned away. Jake would get the message. The Warriors had an excellent communication network, and Jake was one of the leaders. And a friend of Rory's despite the fact that Rory did not believe in violence and had never joined the Warriors.

But there were hundreds of men like Jake, determined to preserve the sovereignty of the Indian nation against all intruders. They were militant and well armed.

Each Warrior was to possess a 12-gauge shotgun with forty rounds or a .223 rifle with one hundred rounds. Handguns were optional. "The Warriors will at all times be a defensive force," read the guidelines. "We will never initiate any action unless so directed by the War Chief. Our responsibility is to protect the people of our nation and our Mother Earth and the things that dwell upon her."

"What do you call yourselves?" Rory had asked Jake once. "Militia? Minutemen?"

"We're the peacekeepers," Jake growled.

Outside of Hogansburg, Highway 37 was dark. Rory had the radio tuned to CKON, the reservation station. He was listening to a rock number when a car materialized on his left. He waited for it to pass, but it slowed to match his own speed. Rory was vaguely aware of a dim shape in an open window, and then a blast of flame and noise. Lightning seared into his shoulder and across his head. The afterimage of the flash lingered for an instant and then faded. The world went black, and the little truck nosed across the shoulder of the road and came to a gentle stop in the ditch.

The erratic behavior of the headlights caught the attention of a NYS trooper car coming up 37 from the opposite direction. The cruiser saw the little pickup canted over in the ditch, turned sharply, and braked behind it.

From a great distance Rory heard voices.

"Looks like another drunken Indian."

"Can it, George. He's not drunk. He's been shot... Hold that flashlight steady . . . hey! I know this guy!"

Someone was shaking him gently and calling his name. Rory opened his eyes and thought he saw the face of an old friend.

"Nash?" he asked weakly. "Is that you, Nash?"

"It's me," said Nash Seymour. "Don't talk, old buddy. We'll get you out of here."

Rory came back to consciousness in a bed in the hospital in Massena. He saw a pleased grin spread across the face of the trooper standing by his bedside.

"You'll be all right, Rory," said Nash. "Just take it easy." He and Rory had gone to high school together in Salmon River. It was pure chance that Nash and his partner had been patrolling on Highway 37 when someone fired a buckshot charge at Rory. And pure chance that Rory had not been killed. Some instinct had prompted him to throw up his left arm defensively. A slug had creased his scalp, another had torn through the muscle of his upper arm. He would wear bandages and a sling for some time.

Another person by the bed grasped his hand. Rory blinked and saw Uncle Mark smiling down at him.

"You're all right, son," Mark said. "The doctor says no concussion." Mark Benjamin looked like a successful insurance salesman. He always wore an old fashioned three-piece suit with a chain across the

vest. With iron gray hair, he could have been forty-five or sixty.

"Donna?" Rory asked in a faint voice.

"She's fine. I told her there had been an accident. She wanted to come, but I told her I would bring you home as soon as the doctors got through with you."

"Thanks. How did you . . ."

"I heard it on the radio, on the police band." Mark glanced behind him. "Captain Barnes is here. Feel up to some questions, son?"

Rory nodded. "Something to tell you, Uncle Mark," he whispered.

"Later, son."

Captain Barnes was a bluff, hearty mountain of a man in the full uniform of a captain of Troop B. He wasn't disappointed that Rory could tell him nothing factual. Rory hadn't seen the gunman, didn't know the make of the car, knew no reason for the attack. "We'll talk again tomorrow, son," Barnes told him.

From the hall Rory heard Barnes's voice, stern and authoritative, addressing the troopers and the hospital staff. "I want this kept absolutely quiet, you understand? I don't want things stirred up on the reservation, you hear me? We don't want last summer all over

again. If it gets out that an Indian was shot, the Warriors will have barricades up by morning. I won't have it, you hear?"

He stuck his head in the door. "Mark, if the boy comes up with anything, you let me know chop-chop."

"You got it, captain."

Barnes disappeared. Nash and his partner were gone. The doctor took a last look at the big white bandage on Rory's head, felt his pulse, and told him to go home and to bed.

Mark said, "I know you've got one hell of a headache, son, but you were lucky. A dozen stitches, no broken bones." He held out his hands to help Rory stand up. "Let's go home. There's someone outside waiting to see you."

Rory leaned on Mark for support. His dizziness and nausea cleared somewhat by the time they reached the parking lot.

Waiting beside Mark's car was Rory's friend, Jake Hightower. He was a bit taller, more heavily muscled than Rory, a fierce man with a permanent scowl on his face. Without a word he grasped Rory's hand. "Someone will pay for this, Rorhare Horn," he said, almost formally.

Then Jake straightened and looked at Mark. "As I told you, I've got a team watching Rory's

house." He indicated the tiny radio at his belt. "The boys tell me a man has arrived there. He's white, armed, hiding by the garage." He paused. "I read it as somebody planning a surprise."

Mark nodded. He didn't seem alarmed. If Jake Hightower had his Warriors on the scene, the scene was secured. "Jake, suppose we plan a little surprise of our own?"

"What say?" Rory asked drowsily.

"Never mind, son."

Rory lived off the reservation near the small town of Helena. Home was a modified trailer, surrounded by flowerbeds and shrubs and a wading pool in the rear. Behind the garage was an old barn that housed Rory Junior's pony, Major.

The house was dark except for a light in the kitchen where Donna sat waiting for her husband.

A car turned into the drive from the highway and stopped. Out stepped a tall man with his arm in a sling and his head swathed in white bandages. A shorter, older man crawled out from behind the wheel, and together they walked up the path toward the back door. It was late, there was no moon, but faint starshine glimmered on the tall man's white headdress.

A man emerged from the side of the garage. He stooped and brought a rifle up to his shoulder. He took careful aim at the man with the bandage on his head. The night was quiet, a soft breeze touched the leaves of an oak tree by the path. The man tracked his target carefully.

Then a strong hand reached out and seized the barrel of the rifle, twisted it upward, wrenched it out of the man's grasp. Other hands seized the man. "What the hell..." he gasped before a gag was placed in his mouth. He struggled, but many hands silently bore him away.

The two men paused by the back door. "All right, Jake," a tiny voice spoke through a radio. "We got him."

Jake Hightower began unwinding the bandage from around his head. "Anybody we know?"

"Nope. Outside talent."

"Okay. Take him into the barn and tell Sam to do his thing."

The smaller man walked back to the car and helped Rory extricate himself from the back seat; it was difficult with one arm in a sling. "Damn it, Uncle Mark! I don't like hiding behind someone else."

"Save it, young fellow. I'm calling the play here. Jake was

glad to be the decoy. You could have got yourself shot all over again."

"Or Jake could have."

Mark shook his head. "No way. Jake's boys had the intruder spotted as soon as he came on the place. He never would have gotten off a round."

"Then, damn it, why did you want Jake to be the decoy?"

Mark grinned.

"Why take chances? Come on and let's see if Donna has any coffee made."

The gunman, who had never been north of the racetrack at Saratoga, nor out of sight of neon or concrete, was terrified. What was to be a simple two hundred dollar hit on a lousy shirttail Indian had gone terribly wrong. His guns were gone, he had been picked up and handled like a baby, he didn't know where he was, he didn't know who the silent, purposeful men surrounding him were, or what was going to happen to him. Whatever it was must be bad.

Very bad.

He felt a post at his back: he was standing, his arms pulled back and bound. He faced ahead in darkness blacker than any he had ever known. From somewhere came the sound of a drum, faint, then stronger, insistent, rough, primitive.

And then there was a light, a

circle of bright light, shining on a rough wooden door. The drum became louder. The door opened.

A horrible figure appeared. A swarthy face with garish streaks of yellow and orange slashed across the cheeks, lips parted in a terrible grin. An Indian, a goblin of childhood, a nightmare returned.

The figure wore a leather vestlike garment, his dark arms and shoulders bare and gleaming with oil or sweat. In beaded headdress with a circle of upright feathers, leather chaps on his legs worked with red and black symbols, his feet stamping in time with the drum, the figure advanced slowly toward him.

From his belt he drew a long wicked-looking knife and tested its edge on his thumb, his eyes never leaving those of the trembling white man. He reached out to touch the white man's cheek, and the man screamed and shrank against his bonds.

The ghostly Indian danced, keeping his eyes on the white man's face. He made slicing motions against his fingers with the knife, nodding and smiling, twisting the knife-blade in the beam of light.

A quiet voice spoke in the white man's ear. "Who sent you here tonight?"

"I'll tell you! Just keep him away from me!"

Mark and Jake sat on one side of the kitchen table, Rory and Donna on the other. Donna was a non-native, a white girl Rory had met in college and married after graduation. Donna couldn't keep her hands away from her husband. She held his arm, constantly touched the bandage on his head, asked him over and over how he felt.

Rory tried to reassure her: "It looks worse than it is," he told her. "The orderly had to take off a lot of hair." He still felt lightheaded. He looked for Rory Junior, then remembered that Donna had sent him to sleep over at his grandmother's house.

Jake was listening to his little radio. "Your visitor is on his way to town, Rory," he said quietly with a nod to Mark. "He'll be our guest for awhile."

Donna looked at the window. "I thought I heard a drum out there," she said in a puzzled tone. "Did anyone else?"

"It was just a tape," Jake said. "Martha uses it in her exercise classes."

Mark handed Rory a small capsule. "Take this, son. I asked the doc for it. It will clear your head for a few minutes while we do some talking. Then

Donna can tuck you into bed."

"All right," Donna said sternly, "but just for a few minutes." She put her arm around Rory protectively. "This Indian needs his rest."

The medicine helped; Rory's headache abated, and he felt almost normal. He squeezed Donna's hand and leaned forward. "Here's what I know, Uncle Mark."

Jake started to rise from the table. "No, stay here, Jake," Rory said quickly. "This concerns the Warriors as much as anybody."

He looked at Uncle Mark. "Art Bowers says firearms are getting through the reservation into Canada. He implied that the Warriors might be involved. I want to show him how wrong he is."

"So do I," said Jake in a low tone.

"The FBI and the ATF are checking every truck and trailer that come on the reservation, and they come up empty. But there's one vehicle they don't bother with. One vehicle that's on the reservation almost every day; in and out of Canada every day."

Mark and Jake were listening intently. Rory was tempted to prolong the suspense, but a twinge of pain banished the thought. He looked from Mark to Jake.

"UPS," he said. "A United Parcel Service delivery van. Either a real one that's been stolen, or a damn good duplicate. UPS delivers everything from baby clothes to generators, and nobody gives it a second thought. It's as innocent as an ice cream truck in August."

Mark slapped the top of the table. "Damn!" he said softly. "Damn!"

Jake nodded his head slowly, his eyes shining.

Quickly Rory related how he had seen two UPS trucks parked side by side in a deserted field on the island. One truck wore Canadian plates, the other New York tags. The drivers were transferring heavy wooden crates from one to the other.

"There must have been a third man there," Rory mused. "Someone who got a good look at me, someone who tried to have me ambushed on the way home."

"Right," said Uncle Mark. "And someone who very soon will think you are dead, that the hit man finished the job tonight."

Rory stared at him in astonishment.

"Look," Mark said. "These people found out you were in the hospital the same way I did—by monitoring the police frequency. That's when they

decided to send someone else out here, the man Jake's team collared.

"I'm going to have Nash Seymour phony up a report on his radio about you cashing in out here tonight." He looked at Donna. "Sorry to be so blunt, girl. It has to be done."

Donna's face was white, but she nodded. "I'm all right. I just wish it were over."

Mark turned to Rory and Jake. "Once that's done, I'll set up something with Barnes and Farley. I'll use a phone I know is secure."

"Wait a minute," Rory mumbled. "There's something else." He was fighting to keep his eyes open. A soft lassitude was spreading over him. But he couldn't close his eyes, not until he'd said something that was important.

"Bowers suggested that the Warriors had something to do with this smuggling. We know that's not true, but it's not enough that we know." Rory closed his eyes, shook his head, and opened them again. "Other people have to know it, too."

He raised one finger and tried to point it at Mark. "Right now . . ." his voice was a whisper; he tried again. "Right now the Mohawks might get a seat in the assembly down in Albany. That could be important to us."



"Maybe," growled Jake. "Maybe not."

Rory stared at him. "Better'n nothing," he mumbled. "Le's don' argue about it now." He concentrated on pointing his wavering finger at Jake.

"All right, old buddy. You're the peacekeepers. So keep some peace around here."

Then Rory was fast asleep, snoring gently.

Jake looked at Mark. "What did he mean by that?"

"I think I know. Here's what we'll do . . ."

The little radio clicked softly. "He's coming down Hilltop Drive," a voice said, "passing First Street."

"I copy," Mark Benjamin replied. "Heads up, everybody. We'll take him at Third."

He looked across the seat at Rory and grinned. "Here we go, kid." Rory felt better after a day's rest. He grinned back and held up both thumbs.

In the back seat of the car Chief Blackwell leaned forward, a wide smile on his face. "Go for it!"

Beside him Art Bowers, agent of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Bureau, frowned. "I still think we need more people."

No one answered him.

Rory had protested strenuously. "We don't need Bowers.

He's got an attitude problem."

"Yes, we do," Mark ruled. "The game is called intra-agency politics. Trust me."

Rory had wanted this to be an all-Indian affair. But he couldn't shut out Uncle Mark. And that opened the door to other white men. What the hell, he thought, I can live with it as long as the Mohawks get some of the credit.

It was a bright spring morning on Akwesasne. Children were in school. Housewives coped with laundry or shopping. A man astride a Wheel-horse riding mower appeared and began cutting grass near the corner. Mark's car was parked on Cherry just off Third; they had a clear view of the intersection. Down the street a tow truck backed out of the Equipment Garage and turned left on Third; it moved past the corner and stopped.

The chocolate brown UPS van coming down the street was a familiar sight in this or any other residential neighborhood. The driver, neat in his brown uniform, sat perched on his stool behind the windshield. He always stopped at stop signs, obeyed all speed regulations.

The driver halted at the intersection, waited, and then blew his horn impatiently at the tow truck blocking his way.

Shaking his head in frustration, the truck driver got out and raised the hood.

The man on the riding mower rode over to the curb to watch, enjoying the driver's predicament. Unnoticed, a station wagon ghosted to a stop close behind the UPS van. Two men got out and quietly approached on foot.

The van driver decided to try to drive around the stalled truck, but found his way blocked. A station wagon was behind him, the riding mower was now out in the street to his left, and on his right two men stood at the open door of the van. They were pointing guns at him.

"What the hell..." He looked ahead and saw a man pointing a rifle at him across the hood of the truck. The yardman was kneeling behind his mower and pointing a gun at him. The men all had very grim expressions.

The van driver had the good sense not to reach down for the ignition key. He left the engine running and raised his hands above his head.

All four men converged on the van. They were Indians, each with a tiny radio at his belt and a red and yellow band on his left arm. Other cars arrived, and the group grew into a small crowd.

Art Bowers ran up and began issuing orders. "Put the prisoner in that car... read him his rights... don't touch those crates... keep this traffic moving..." A reporter who had received an anonymous invitation to be in this vicinity this morning appeared. He plied Bowers with questions.

"Is it true the Warriors made a citizens' arrest?"

"Well, yes..."

"Can I get a picture of you and the Mohawks together?"

"Well, yes..."

To the delight of the bystanders and the reporter, one of the wooden crates from the cargo section of the van was opened. Labeled "Hydraulic Pump Repair Parts," the crate contained M-60 machine guns liberally coated with grease.

A state trooper sought out Rory and Mark, who were standing at the rear of the crowd. "They made a clean sweep down in Westchester this morning, Mr. Benjamin," he said. "Nailed the whole outfit."

"Glad to hear it," said Mark. "The Ontario police did a good job, too."

The trooper hesitated, looking from the older white man to the younger Indian man. "How come the Warriors got to make the bust, Mr. Benjamin?" he asked. "We could have done it."

"Sure you could, son. You're the professionals. But this is Mohawk territory. Rory, you explain it."

Rory didn't make the usual comments about sovereignty and self-rule and jurisdiction. He just said, "It's your law, but it's our land."

The trooper nodded slowly. "Right."

Jake Hightower, who had been the man on the riding mower, walked up. "Everything go to suit you, Mr. Benjamin?" he asked.

Mark punched him on the arm and grinned. "Couldn't have done better myself."

Jake looked at Rory. He pointed at the red and yellow band on his arm. "We've got one of these for you any time you want it, Rory."

"Thanks, Jake. I'll think about it." Rory had to go to his office, but he was reluctant to leave. The street was filling with people, and the atmosphere was almost that of a block party.

A television crew from

Plattsburgh had arrived and was filming everyone and everything in sight. Jake and his Warriors had discreetly put their weapons out of sight and were mingling with the crowd. The other tribal chiefs were on hand with Harry Blackwell, smiling and shaking hands.

Mark Benjamin was ready to leave. "This won't hurt a bit down in Albany," he said to Rory. "Your nation may get that assembly seat some day." Rory nodded. "My best to Donna."

Rory watched Uncle Mark drive away. He turned to go but stopped when someone called his name. It was Art Bowers.

The agent walked up, his face flushed with excitement. "Ah, Horn," he said, "you Indians did a fine job this morning. A mighty fine job."

The patronizing tone set Rory's teeth on edge, but he realized Bowers was being sincere. What the hell, Rory thought, some white men can't help being clay-headed.

"Thanks, Bowers," Rory said. "Be our guest any time."

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# Fugu

by William Beechcroft

**M**anaging Editor Charlie Lovett wore a little smirk. "You got any idea what *fugu* is, Forrest?"

"Puffer fish," Dan told him. All of Charlie's two hundred forty pounds sagged in disappointment.

"Damn! Thought I had you. How about a *Kaiseki ryori*?"

"Got me there, Charlie."

He grinned smugly. "It's a Japanese formal dinner. And you're invited."

"What do you mean, I'm invited?" Japanese cuisine wasn't Dan's favorite. "I'm *News-Leak*'s crime reporter, not the roving food critic. Give it to Blauvelt."

"He's on another assignment. You're the winner of this one."

Charlie ran sausage fingers through his thatch of meringue hair. A signal, Dan had learned, that he wasn't about to back down.

Having boozed his way to this bottom of the journalistic food chain, Dan was in no position to argue. Dry as he had been for the past several years, he knew he was on perpetual

probation. Hell of a position to be in for a Columbia grad who had cut his professional teeth on the *New York Times*. Now in his mid-forties, he was a tabloid bottom-feeder.

"Charlie, what's a Japanese dinner got to do with crime reporting—wait a minute. You said something about *fugu*."

Charlie's eyes rolled ceilingward. "Thank you, God. There's hope, after all." His watery blues skewered Dan. "You know that puffer fish is a Japanese delicacy? You know that if it's not prepared by a chef who knows exactly what he's doing, *fugu* can kill you? Well, they're serving *fugu* at this *Kaiseki rigatoni*—"

"*Ryori*, I thought you said."

"Whatever, Forrest. You get yourself over to the Golden Tory—"

"I think that's *Tor-ee-ee*, Charlie, as in *T-o-r-i-i*."

"That's what I said. Up on 57th. It's Hiroki Tanaka's eightieth birthday, and you're the lucky guy to represent me."

"Who's Hiroki Tanaka?"

"Guy I worked with in Japan back in '45. The Occupation. I

was a sergeant, he was civilian clerk."

"You were friends?"

"Could say that. I nearly married his sister."

"Nearly?"

"Yeah," Charlie grunted. A distant look crept into his gaze. "He wasn't exactly for it. Neither was their old man. Fact is, I had to get myself shipped out of Tokyo."

He stood up ponderously, walked around his battered swivel, and leaned on its back. "When Tanaka moved here in the 1960's, I talked to him on the phone a few times, then we sort of let things fade. Never could quite read how he felt about me."

"And now he's asked you to his birthday fugufest. To embrace you or erase you?"

"Forrest, he was a close buddy, except for the sister thing." Charlie shrugged meaty shoulders. "I'd go myself if I didn't—"

"—have so much to do here. Yeah, Charlie."

"Besides, Daniel, you could get a story out of it. 'Birthday Stuffer Is Deadly Puffer.'"

"You're a born wordsmith, Charlie. Maybe I'd better put in a call to Cousin Roy to stand by." Sometimes he suspected that his cousinship with Detective Lieutenant Roy Forrest at Manhattan Homicide was the

reason Charlie kept Dan around when he occasionally bobbled a story. Couldn't hurt *NewsLeak* to have a pipeline to the NYPD.

"Up to 57th tomorrow at noon, Forrest. And tell old Tanaka I wish him happy birthday. I told him you'd be there in my place."

"I hope he doesn't believe in killing the messenger."

Before Dan joined the festivities up on 57th, he spent some time in the New York Public Library boning up on fugu. A swell little fish with something called tetrodotoxin in its intestines, liver, and ovaries. Nice stuff, two hundred seventy-five times more deadly than cyanide. But fugu eating was a craze in Japan. A restaurant could net two hundred dollars per puffer, but an experienced fugu chef had better prepare it. The puffer death rate in Nippon had averaged twenty a year through the past decade. Enough puffer poison killed you by shutting down the nervous system, and enough was one milligram, the amount that would cover the letter "o" in standard newspaper copy. One average-sized fugu fish carried enough toxin to do in thirty gourmets. Nice stuff, and no known antidote.

He found a dandy little ditty

about this off-putting fish:

*Last night he and I ate fugu;  
Today, I help carry his coffin.*

Charlie, thanks a heap.

**F**ive aged Japanese gentlemen were seated on straw mats around the big rectangular table when Dan shucked off his shoes and stepped into the private room in the rear of the Golden Torii.

The sixth man greeted him at the sliding door with a medium bow—not overly formal, but not exactly warm, either.

“Mr. Daniel Forrest? I am Hiroki Tanaka. So pleased to meet you.”

“Mr. Lovett sends birthday congratulations,” Dan offered, trying to mask his bothersome tad of apprehension. “And he wishes you many more.”

Tanaka smiled. “So pleased.”

He looked like a Japanese Gregory Peck. Tall man, dignified, well-preserved at four score. He was dressed in a long purple robe tied in the middle with an orange sash.

The others were in coats and ties. They looked like board members of the Tokyo National Bank. As one, they rose, and each bowed pleasantly as he was introduced. Dan bowed back, feeling hugely out of

place. Then they all sank together with popping knees. Dan’s place was at the foot of the table, to the host’s left. And, he noted, well below the sake. He was a guest at this exclusive nooner, but far from the guest of honor.

Using a word association gimmick, Dan had made an effort to remember all their names during the mass intro. To his immediate right was Mr. Yoho (“and a bottle of rum”), a heavyset fellow with thinning white hair. In his fifties, Dan guessed. Yoho was the youngest man there, except for Dan.

Between Yoho and their host at the head of the table sat Mr. Shoyu (“I’ll show you”). A rangy man in his seventies, Dan judged, with near-bronze skin, he was the talker of the group. In a flood of impenetrable Japanese.

No one was at the foot of the table. Directly across from Dan sat a glowering Mr. Matsui (“Mott Street suey”). He had a face of carved beige soapstone beneath a totally hairless scalp. Matsui sat wordless with an expression impossible to read.

To his left was Mr. Hojo (“Howard Johnson”), elderly like the others, but with a full head of hair, obviously dyed or a toupee, combed straight back.

The remaining guest, to

Hojo's left and in the place of honor at host Tanaka's immediate right, was Mr. Robun ("keeps boh-boh-bohbbin along"). Dan's word association on him was right on the mark. He was an active fellow with long strands of black hair combed from just over his right ear clear across his shiny scalp. He just couldn't sit still, even when he wasn't slipping in a word or two when the garrulous Mr. Shoyu paused for breath.

Their host coughed discreetly for silence, then said a few words in Japanese. Formal greeting, thanks for coming, Dan guessed when he caught a couple of *arigatos*. His Japanese was World War II movie rerun.

Then Tanaka clapped his hands. The paper screen door slid open, and in came two of the prettiest Japanese women he'd ever seen. Their waitresses. One was tiny with a short bob; the other was tall for a Japanese, with lustrous blueblack hair to her shoulders—and with startlingly brilliant green eyes. All around the table Dan heard sudden intakes of breath, well short of the spirited reaction these two gorgeous ladies would have generated from a group of American geezers. But the male appreciation was there,

all right—from everyone except the silent Mr. Matsui across the table from Dan. He glowered.

The decorative ladies worked around the table, setting in front of each diner dishes and cups from the stacks on the table, then distributing pairs of paper-sheathed chopsticks. A fork for Dan, which, while ensuring that he would eat, seemed something of a put-down.

They poured the initial round of sake from the two porcelain pitchers on the table. Mr. Shoyu, the talker, made a toast. Dan lifted his cup but faked a sip. Even the faint bouquet was a threat.

Then came a bewildering succession of beautifully prepared and arranged appetizers. Amazing how good raw fish looked. On Dan's right, Mr. Yoho caught his hesitation and pointed at something on the tray in front of them, something on a skewer. Dan tried it. Barbecued chicken. He gave Mr. Yoho a smile and a nod of thanks. Yoho beamed.

Next came a clear soup, a touch on the briny side but not bad at all. Then a round of raw fish without Dan's chicken escape. He tried it. Tasted like . . . raw fish.

The attentive waitresses cleared the used dishes yet

again and reappeared with platters of what looked like pork, rice, and cabbage. "*Ton-katsu*," Mr. Yoho whispered helpfully. It was pork, rice, and cabbage. All right so far.

Following the next table clearance came what Dan realized was a dramatic pause. Then the papered doorway slid wide and in came the taller of the attendants, carrying a large blue lacquered platter. When she lowered it to the table, Dan was taken aback by the beauty of what was on it: a large crane in full flight, all of it made of delicate slices of something translucent. Surely they weren't intended to eat this work of art.

Mr. Tanaka cleared his throat. He said something in a reverent singsong that brought understanding nods from everyone but Dan.

"It is a traditional verse, Mr. Forrest," Tanaka explained. "Those who eat fugu are stupid. But," he raised a forefinger, "those who do not eat fugu are also stupid."

So this exquisitely sculptured crane was the fugu.

It looked benign enough. The platter was passed to the guest of honor. Skillfully, Mr. Robun flicked several slices onto his plate. Next, Mr. Hojo took his serving. And Mr. Matsui. Then Matsui thrust the platter to-

ward Dan. There was no way out of this. Using his alien fork, he extracted a couple of innocent-looking slices from the crane's outstretched right wing, and he passed the platter to Mr. Yoho.

Dan suppressed a shiver. *To-day I help carry his coffin . . .* Had to read all about it, didn't you, Forrest?

Six pairs of eyes were focused on him. He offered a weak smile. And he nibbled a slice.

Crow, Dan had read, tasted like chicken. Rattlesnake tasted like chicken.

Damned if fugu didn't taste like fishy chicken. Smooth, and rich, but no body to it. More like chicken Jell-O. He'd rather have had chicken. But there was a certain weird thrill at eating something with such a horrendous reputation.

What the hell. He ate the second slice. All around the table he saw approving nods. Especially from the hyperactive Mr. Robun. He was boh-boh-bohbin along, all right.

Then he wasn't. He froze in mid-bohb. His eyes fixed on the wall over Mr. Shoyu's bronze stare. Then all eyes riveted on Mr. Robun.

Dan had read that a fugu victim's arms and legs turn numb. The vocal cords are paralyzed. The brain stays clear, then breathing stops.



Mr. Robun seemed to be working on that scenario. His mouth dropped open. His breath came faster and faster. Then stopped. His eyes rolled high.

And he toppled over backward.

Dan's first reaction was a cynical one. Oh, come on, gents. All this for my benefit? He waited for Mr. Robun to bob up again while the room dissolved in laughter at this elaborate Nipponese practical joke on the naive Westerner.

Mr. Robun stayed put on the tatami matting.

Dan's next thought, crass tabloid reporter that he was, centered on what a great *News-Leak* story this was going to be.

**T**he restaurant manager called an ambulance. Dan called Cousin Roy. Both arrived at the same time. The late Mr. Robun ("Dead all right," Roy astutely observed) was micro-checked by the next-arriving medical examiner, photographed, then toted out in a zippered body pouch. Roy brought the luncheon guests back to their secluded dining alcove one at a time, Tanaka first, Dan last.

When Tanaka emerged and strode past Dan with a grim "So very sorry," Roy stuck his head through the sliding door

and bawled, "Anybody here who can interpret?"

A busboy in the middle of the restaurant confusion shouted, "Okay, I do it," and trotted to the private room.

In went, at ten minute intervals, Yoho, Shoyu, Matsui, and Hojo, each stepping out and back into his shoes stonefaced. Then it was Dan's turn. He shucked off his Thom McAns and went in. Crosslegging it on the tatami again was more than he could hack, and he was sure Roy hadn't even considered it, so they both stood and kind of ambled around. With his brogans still on his feet, Roy noisily crunched the matting. He was built like a Rottweiler, big-boned, a touch squatty, but agile enough. Dan had him in the height department by four inches.

"So," Roy said, "how've you been?"

"Getting along, cousin. Getting along."

"No, uh, problems with . . ." Roy left that hanging.

"Dry as the proverbial bone." Dan gestured around the table, which had been cleared. "What's happened to the evidence?"

"I've had every dish and bowl and all utensils impounded for forensics. What do you make of all this?"

"The obvious conclusion is

that the fugu—" He looked at Roy questioningly.

"Got the fugu background from Tanaka. Go ahead."

"Looks like the chef wasn't as qualified as our host assumed. The platter went around, and the unlucky gourmet snared the poisoned fillet."

"Writers," Roy muttered. "So that's what you think? Botched preparation and an accident?"

"That might be what we're supposed to think."

Roy stuffed his hands in the pockets of his baggy trousers. The matting crackled protestingly as he paced one side of the small room. "Supposed to think?"

"The setup seems too pat," Dan told him. "Tanaka invites a newspaper editor to his eightieth birthday party after being out of touch for years, then—"

"Editor? You got a promotion?"

"I was a stand-in for Charlie. Tanaka was a buddy of his back in MacArthur's Tokyo."

"You think he wanted Charlie here to witness an 'accident' that was really a murder?"

"Charlie thought Tanaka wanted him here maybe to get even with him for dishonoring Tanaka's sister back in the forties."

"You said they were buddies."

"Aside from the sister thing."

Dan began to do some pacing of his own on the opposite side of the shin-high table. "If that was the case, though, and I showed up instead of Charlie, I'd expect Tanaka to call off anything unsavory he'd planned for Charlie. Doing me in wouldn't be quite the same thing."

"Sure would have focused Charlie's attention, though. Insulted Colombians have been known to wipe out entire families. The Oriental idea of revenge might be a lot trickier than a simple punch in the jaw. Say the poisoned fish got past you somehow, and Robun took it by mistake."

"Won't wash, Roy. The waitresses didn't serve the stuff individually. We passed the platter ourselves, and it went to Robun first."

Roy started to lean against the partition beside the door, realized it was paper, and resumed his pacing.

"What did you get out of the other four guests?" Dan asked him.

Roy shrugged. "Whatever the busboy wanted to tell me. I'll have to interview them all again with a department interpreter. All four either spoke no English at all, or they decided they wouldn't speak it to a homicide cop."

He stopped at the head of the

table. "Let's reconstruct the setup here. Tanaka, the host, sat where I'm standing. You were down there at the end on the left. In between us . . ." He flipped open a pocket notebook. "Yoho on your right, then Shoyu. Along the other side were Matsui across from you, then Hojo, then the deceased between him and Tanaka, the host."

Roy slapped the notebook shut. "Can't make much out of that except that Robun was sitting in a handy spot for Tanaka to slip him a fugu mickey, if that's what he had in mind."

"What about Robun's relationship with Tanaka?"

"According to Tanaka, Robun was the old boy's investment advisor."

"Interesting possibilities there," Dan suggested.

"Except that Tanaka's a multimillionaire and doing very well, according to the busboy's translation of what Yoho told me. Yoho said he's Tanaka's trust officer at Mercantile."

"You find out what the rest of them do?"

Roy consulted his notebook again. "Shoyu is an old friend of Tanaka's from Tokyo days. He's a metallurgist at Garden State Steel over in Newark. The guy who sat next to Robun—Minoru Hojo, the one with the dyed hair—he's Ta-

naka's insurance advisor. And the fella who sat across from you, Shiga Matsui, he's a cabinetmaker."

"A cabinetmaker? Kind of out of his depth in that group, wasn't he?"

"Thought so myself," Roy agreed, "but it turns out he's not your run-of-the-mill saw-and-sand man. He's a master cabinetmaker, a high respect category in Japan. Tanaka just finished doing over his Fifth Avenue condo, and Matsui had a big piece of the decorating contract."

"What's Tanaka's line?"

"Damn, cousin, I'm supposed to be questioning you. He made his pile importing Oriental art for retailers all over the U.S." Roy paused. "You see the problem? Nothing about Tanaka points to a motive."

"Unless Robun was done in by mistake. By Tanaka trying for somebody else and nailing Robun as an unlucky bysitter."

Roy frowned. "I hope not. It's murky enough with Robun as the intended victim. Hey, maybe I'll luck out and it'll turn out to be a heart attack."

**A** day later, back in his little plywood cell in *NewsLeak's* gritty fourth floor offices on Seventh Avenue, Dan pondered the imponderable. There had

been no way a murderer could have delivered a lethal dose of tetrodotoxin to a selected victim via the edible crane on its lacquered platter. So if it hadn't been a heart attack, it was a tragic accident.

Had to be. Except for Robun's dropping dead, had there been anything remarkably remarkable at that extraordinary get-together?

Accidental poisoning. Or maybe, after all, it was what was laughingly termed "natural causes." Heart attack, as Roy hoped.

That idea was scotched when Roy called around four thirty. "Prelim report from the M.E., cuz. It was no heart attack."

"The forensics people are pretty fast down there on 30th Street."

"Slow week, plus computer analysis. Looks like fish poison, all right. Lucky more of you didn't get hit."

"You're saying it *was* accidental poisoning, Roy?"

"I'm saying I filed my DD-5, and that's what I was told to put on it. Case closed, if you know what I mean. Helps with the caseload mountain here." He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "But, cuz, you're a free agent."

"Got you, Roy." They had an understanding; used each other now and then to get around cer-

tain obstacles. Roy's unstated message: I'm not sold on the accident theory, but I'm stymied by departmental bureaucracy.

He hung up, and Dan went back to musing about aberrations at that now-infamous party . . . and Shiga Matsui's glower during the moment of otherwise universal appreciation for the two striking attendants. Was he only an aging grouch, or had that sourball grimace meant something?

On impulse, Dan picked up the phone again and dialed Hiroki Tanaka's residence. The old man's personal assistant, who had a youthful, polite voice, left the line to consult his employer. And told Dan that Tanaka would be glad to "receive" him tomorrow at two P.M.

**G**rabbing a quick, portable lunch at Nedick's—this job had turned out to be hell stomachwise—Dan walked the three long blocks east to the IRT and subwayed up to the East Seventies. The Gold Coast. Three shorter blocks westward, he found the building. Brick with concrete trim, and a number in gold. No name.

After an I.D. check and a verifying call, Security let him take one of the mahogany-lined elevators to the fourteenth

floor. The entrance to Tanaka's unit was just a few strides down the plush hallway runner.

The houseman, in pinstriped vest and trousers, ushered Dan in with a precisely correct bow. The word "unit" was an insult to this spread. It was right out of the Japanese version of *Architectural Digest*, all brocade hangings and lustrous, hand-rubbed woodwork. Master cabinetmaker Matsui's work, no doubt.

The assistant cleared his throat discreetly and nodded at Dan's shoes. He pulled them off and followed the trim little man across a half-acre of ivory carpeting lush as lamb's wool.

Tanaka rose from a low sofa that faced an immense floor-to-ceiling picture window overlooking Central Park. A real breather, that Cineramic view. As if they were floating in mid-air nearly two hundred feet above one of America's most beautiful stretches of urban acreage.

Incongruously, the old man wore bright green plaid golf slacks and an eyedazzling saffron cardigan.

"So pleasant to see you again, Mr. Forrest." He offered a dry claw of a hand. "My deep apologies for the terrible incident day before yesterday. Most regrettable. Most regrettable, indeed."

"Mr. Lovett was . . . surprised at your invitation," Dan told him. "He wasn't sure about your intentions."

"Honorable intentions," the old man said. "After a long life in America, I have come to realize that what happened between Charles and me was simply a clash of cultures. Not an insult. But apology does not come easily in Japan. There has not yet been an apology for Nanking. Not even for Pearl Harbor. It has taken me decades to realize I should apologize to Charles."

"That's why he was invited?"

"Yes. And when he could not accept, it would have been a true insult not to welcome his representative."

"You were very gracious, Mr. Tanaka." Dan paused. "The unfortunate poisoning of Mr. Robun, of course, is what I'm here about." After a call from Roy three hours ago, Dan felt he was already one up on Hiroki Tanaka. He pulled out his notebook.

Tanaka eyed it. "I am now speaking, I assume, 'on the record,' Mr. Forrest?"

For a tabloid reporter, nothing was ever off the record.

"I'm afraid so, sir, but I'm not here to build a sensational plot around what may have been an unfortunate mistake." (Forgive me, Charlie.)

"Ah," Tanaka said softly, "but it was not a mistake."

That was the last thing Dan had expected him to say.

"You aren't actually admitting—"

He held up a frail hand. "It was not a mistake because Mr. Kanagawa does not make mistakes."

"Mr. Kanagawa?"

"The fugu chef I had flown in from San Francisco for the occasion. He does not make mistakes."

"But the lab tests. I got the report this morning directly from the police. Mr. Robun's death was from fugu poisoning."

"Obviously," said Tanaka, totally unruffled. "I do not need tests to tell me that. I have seen death from fugu."

"What are you telling me, Mr. Tanaka?" This interview wasn't going at all as Dan had expected.

"I offer no conclusions. A friend whom I valued is dead of fugu poisoning. Such an event cannot be the fault of Mr. Kanagawa."

"Any chef can make a mistake."

The old man's chin came up, and in the crackly parchment of his face, his mouth tightened. "Not," he said sharply, "Master Chef Yukichi Kanagawa."

Dan tried another tack. "When the waitresses first entered the room, there was a general appreciation. Except for Mr. Matsui. I couldn't help notice his, well, apparent resentment."

"You are very observant, Mr. Forrest." Tanaka smiled thinly, showing the edges of ivory-tinted teeth. "But that incident is not difficult to understand. The taller of the two women, the one with the long hair, is Mr. Matsui's niece."

Well, well.

"He is very protective of her since her Caucasian mother died and her father—Mr. Matsui's brother—returned to Japan, leaving Nikko in her uncle's care."

Ah-ah! A Caucasian mother, eh? Hence the green eyes. And Matsui was her uncle. But then, so what? Perhaps that was no more than an interesting sidelight to that strange luncheon.

"Assuming you are right about Chef Kanagawa's abilities, Mr. Tanaka, might you have any idea how Mr. Robun could have eaten a piece of poisoned fugu?"

Tanaka shook his head. "No, Mr. Forrest, I have not."

"He was sitting between you and Mr. . . ." Dan checked his notes. Howard Johnson. "Mr. Hojo."

"So Detective Forrest—" Tanaka frowned. "Curious. Two Mist'ers Forrest."

"He's my cousin."

"Ah. Convenient."

"Sometimes."

Beneath the wispy eyebrows, Tanaka's sharp little eyes held Dan's.

"Yes, Mr. Hojo and I were in arm's reach of Mr. Robun's plate. But do you seriously believe that if either of us wished to do away with Mr. Robun, we would have chosen such an obvious opportunity?" He crossed his stiff legs in their dazzling golfer's plaid. "And the opportunity was not as great as you may believe. You will recall that there were no individual servings."

He plucked absently at an invisible something on his knee. "The Western mind often leaps to the apparent obvious. Do I assume that your cousin, the police lieutenant, has made such a leap?"

"Not at all, Mr. Tanaka." Dan decided there was no need to tell him that Roy's superior had made a leap to another apparently obvious conclusion, that the poisoning had been an accident. Dan also didn't tell Tanaka that he had just decided to pay a visit to Mr. Matsui.

"Tea, gentlemen?" asked Tanaka's natty aide from the dis-

tant entrance to this palatial sitting area. And the rest of Dan's time high over Central Park's hazy green splendor was spent in listening to quite a touching reminiscence of a far younger Hiroki Tanaka's friendship with youthful (had Charlie ever been young?) Sergeant Charles Lovett in post V-J Day Tokyo.

Back on the IRT, Dan barreled beneath Park Avenue, then under Lafayette, to the Spring Street station. Manhattan was not as pretty way down here as it had been from Tanaka's cloud tower. He found Matsui's Cabinetry a couple of short blocks east in one of New York's gritty pockets.

On the rattling ride south, he'd had time to do some constructive thinking. As old Tanaka had pointed out, everything served at the deadly luncheon had been "family style." All the platters had been placed on the table, then the guests had helped themselves in rotation. It had been impossible to poison just one diner out of seven that way. Then Dan had sat straight up on the hard subway seat. Except for—but where was the motive?

He cupped his hands against Matsui Cabinetry's clouded plate glass. The interior was

murky except for a hint of light far in the back. There was no bell button. He rapped on the glass in the upper part of the door.

"Matsui not hear that," said a quavery voice behind Dan. An aged Oriental stood on the sidewalk, hands on his hips, chin jutting forward. "You a friend of Matsui?"

"No, I'm a reporter."

"Reporter? You write story 'bout that son bitch, you write he killed my cat."

"Your cat?" What was going on here?

"I am Tenno. I own wholesale place next door. There." Mr. Tenno pointed. "I sell good line of *Ukiyo-ye* copies."

Dan's blank look distressed him. "Wood block, wood block prints. Copies of Harunobu, Sharaku, Kiyonaga—old masters. You interested?"

"Sorry, no. What's this about your cat?"

"Matsui put out garbage, cat eat garbage. Dead cat. Son bitch Matsui. You write that."

Dan peered back through the dirty glass storefront. "I don't think he's in there."

"In there all right." Tenno stepped up to the door and flailed it with both fists. Dan was sure that barrage could be heard over on the Bowery, a block away.

He detected motion way back

in the cabinet shop. So did Tenno.

"I go now," he muttered. "I do not talk to Matsui until he apologize for death of cat."

When Shigā Matsui unshackled his door and peered up at Dan with all the warmth of a pit bull, Mr. Tenno had silently evaporated. It was at that point that Dan realized Matsui had not spoken a word of English at the ill-fated birthday party. Here Dan stood armed with a three-word Japanese vocabulary.

"*Ohayo*," he said.

"I'm busy," muttered the glowering Mr. Matsui in accentless English. "Whatever you want, get it out, then get lost."

Dan groped for English of his own. "I, uh, want to ask a couple of questions about the birthday party."

"Most unfortunate," Matsui said without a trace of regret in his hard soapstone expression. "But 'those who eat fugu—'"

"'Are stupid,'" Dan finished for him. "May I come in?"

"No, thank you," said Matsui coldly. "You are not police. As I recall, you are a reporter for a disreputable newspaper."

He was a foot shorter than Dan, but his Telly Savalas coiffure and his Mr. Five-by-Five stature had real presence.

"Okay," Dan said. "I'll get



right to the point. Did you know Mr. Robun?"

"*Hai*, I knew him." There seemed a touch of bitterness in his from-the-belly tone.

"He was a friend?"

Matsui said nothing.

Dan took a long, long shot. "I just left Mr. Tanaka. He spoke very warmly of Mr. Robun."

Matsui's eyes narrowed, and his voice took on a flinty edge. "Robun is not worthy of discussion."

Oho. "Why do you say that, Mr. Matsui?"

"It is personal. Do not quote me in what you write, but in my opinion, the gods justly sentenced him."

Not a bad line.

"I'm not sure I follow that," Dan said. "You mean it was a fatal accident Mr. Robun deserved?"

Matsui bowed, just slightly, an ironic little gesture. "Today, we carry his coffin."

"You're going to his funeral?"

"A figure of speech. I will have nothing to do with his funeral."

"Somehow that seems, well, not in keeping with—"

"Japanese custom? What can you know of Japanese custom?"

"An assumption." Dan decided to throw him a curve. "Do you eat in your shop, Mr. Matsui?"

He frowned. "No, I walk down to Little Italy. Why do you ask?"

Now Dan tried a change-up. "You don't show much regret at the death of a respected countryman?"

"Respected!" Matsui's voice was a near-squeak. His saffron complexion turned purple. That had apparently hit him where he lived. "Respected! He was an *animal*!"

"How so?"

"Nikko—" Then he shut up.

"What about Nikko, Mr. Matsui?"

"Good day, sir." It was name, rank, and serial number time.

"About Mr. Tenno's cat, Mr. Matsui?"

But Matsui was already through the door. It slammed shut in Dan's face.

Back up to midtown on the good old IRT. Dan was beginning to feel like the Phantom of the Subway. Off at the 59th Street station, he backtracked to 57th and found Nikko Matsui on duty at the Golden Torii setting tables for the early supper crowd.

"Dan Forrest from *News-Leak*, Ms. Matsui. A word with you, please?" He saw her blanch a bit beneath the soft ivory of her cheeks. My God, he realized all over again, she was one beautiful woman.

She glanced around ner-

vously. For the manager who might object to this interruption, or because a *NewsLeak* interview wasn't exactly a soothing prospect under the circumstances? Said circumstances were beginning to point in an interesting direction.

"I just left your uncle," he told Nikko, "and I got the impression that you and Mr. Robun were not exactly buddies."

Her startling emerald-green eyes flashed. "He was a—no, we were not friends."

"You are not sorry he served himself the poisoned part of the fugu?"

She was visibly relieved at that. "To be honest, Mr. . . . Forrest, is it? No, I am not mourning Mr. Robun. He was . . . he was . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"He was a financial advisor. Did you have dealings with him?"

"He was my uncle's investment counselor."

"And he stole money from him?" That seemed a distinct possibility.

"No, no. He was very honest. Uncle Shiga made money through his advice."

"Then what—"

Her lovely face suddenly glowed crimson. Shame?

"It was between Robun and you, wasn't it?" Dan said. "Something personal."

She stood very straight, and her mouth compressed to a thin line. Then she said almost in a whisper, "One day last month, Mr. Robun came when my uncle was not at home. He would not leave. Then he—" The green eyes flared. "You cannot put this in your paper, Mr. Forrest. Rape is extremely personal." She shut up and turned away, a Matsui family trait. Dan found a pay phone back near the restrooms and put in a call to Roy.

They met at the Golden Torii at eleven the next morning, the time the manager had told Dan that Nikko Matsui came on duty. Conscientious woman that she was, she showed up right on time. Not showing would have been futile anyway. Roy had put a couple of men on watch all night at her apartment building.

He and Nikko and Dan sat at a table in a secluded corner. Roy gave Dan a nod, and Dan ran with it.

"There was no way the food or the tea or the sake could have been tampered with so that only Mr. Robun was poisoned. It had to be delivered just to him. Even the plates and cups were set out from stacks on the table. It finally hit me that there had been one exception."

Nikko lowered her head. Her long blueblack hair fell forward to frame her delicate face.

"Then there was Mr. Tenno's cat. It died from eating food in your uncle's cabinetry trash. But he told me he always ate out. What was food doing in his cabinetry shop? Roy?"

"Tenno just couldn't get himself to put his pet cat's body in the trash. He still had it. We picked it up after your call yesterday, Dan. Had it tested. Fugu killed the cat." Roy turned to Nikko. "Your uncle had bought his own puffer."

"And he'd bought it," Dan put in, "to do a little fancy woodworking."

Nikko Matsui stared at the tablecloth.

"Roy?"

"You were there, Dan," he said. "Go ahead."

"The only items delivered individually at that lunch were the chopsticks. I watched you set them around the table, Nikko. I watched you give Mr. Robun his pair. Chopsticks specially treated by your uncle the day before."

Roy sat back and folded his bulky arms. "We'd bagged and

tagged all the dishes and sticks by individual users. When Dan called me yesterday, it wasn't any trick to find Robun's sticks. This morning, forensics reported tetrodotoxin in a slow-dissolving gelatin base. It had been worked into microscopic grooves at the ends of Robun's chopsticks. By the time the fugu was passed around, whappo! Down he goes. Obvious goof-up by the chef. An accident."

"And only you and Uncle Shiga knew," Dan added. "Or *did* you know, Nikko? You took a set of sticks from here, gave them to your uncle. Then he returned them and told you to give them to Robun. But did you know what was on them?"

At that instant, Roy stepped in with what Dan thought was either ultimate technical correctness—or surprising chivalry.

"You have the right to remain silent," he boomed. "You are not required to say anything to us at any time or to answer any questions."

As he went on with the rest of the Miranda warning, Nikko Matsui looked up at Roy. A slow smile spread across her elegant face.

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# As Ye Sow So Shall Ye . . .

by Don Marshall

“**N**ow look here, Kanine,” reproached Grippe in a voice meant to chill the heart of even the gentlest of well-meaning, honest, hardworking souls. His tone was designed to inflict damage, the inflection was meant to twist the blade of deadly content, so to speak, while the moderation was that of funereal softness and lasting horror. “You know how much I have bent over backwards to assist you and your family, what’s left of it, and that rundown piece of worthless property you so off-handedly refer to as your farm.”

Farmer Kanine slumped in the plain wooden chair, one of two that faced the scarred counting desk of banker Grippe in the painfully sterile office of the one and only bank in Downcast, South Dakota. The farmer’s skinny arms rested on his knees as he leaned forward. His palms alternately pressed upward in supplication, then desperately constricted into clenched fists.

“But you don’t understand, Mr. Grippe. Since Emma . . .”

“I well know what has happened since your Emma died. However, Mr. Kanine, you must admit that I, through Christian generosity, advanced you the wherewithal, headstone included, for her proper funeral and interment on the farm. In view of the previous year’s drought along with your unfortunate animals’ getting the blind staggers, I have been, shall we say, generous to a fault with you and your misfortunes.”

The rawboned, hardscrabble dirt farmer raised his head, the banker’s face blurred through tear-filled eyes. “I . . . I know you have, Mr. Grippe, but now, with my girl Jenny gettin’ so sick and havin’ to go to thet sanitorium, it’s . . .”

“Look here, Kanine, it is certainly no fault of mine that your daughter came down with consumption, though I wholeheartedly maintain that anyone with that sort of disease ought to be put away. Not as punishment, mind you, but merely as a precaution to the health and welfare of our more worthy citizens. However, that is not my problem.

“My problem, at the moment, is to collect the money, a substan-



"I'M TALKING TO YOU, DAMNIT, KANINE. HOW DARE YOU IGNORE ME LIKE THIS!"

tial sum, I might add, that you borrowed against your . . . what you call a farm. Though it was against my better judgment, Kanine, I extended myself purely out of Christian charity."

The black-suited banker leaned back, tented his fingertips, and, while obviously enjoying the pitiful spectacle squirming before him, waited for a reply. One, he knew, that again would be beggarly and which, he also knew, he would reject.

"If only I can get my wheat in, Mr. Grippe. I know I could pay you then. It's a good crop. Prices are up right now and . . ."

"And just how do you expect to get this wheat crop in, Mr. Kanine?" It pleased Grippe to tack on the *mister* in front of the farmer's name, a longstanding habit, a joke, a cat tormenting a helpless mouse. "Because of your inept management of the farm . . . understand I say *your* inept management, I was forced to claim your draft animals, skinny as they were. Bad business, Mr. Kanine. Then, on top of that, I was forced, mind you, forced, to auction off your reaper, too. May I remind you all at a considerable loss to myself?" With his middle finger, he pressed upward on the bridge of his wire-rimmed spectacles.

"But you didn't lose, Mr. Grippe. You know as well as I do that you bought the animals yourself, the reaper, too. It was almost new. The two horses, why they was in fine condition, Belgian draft they was and in fine condition."

He stared at the bare wooden floor, claspings and unclasping his hands.

"And I was a good . . . I am a good farmer and a hard worker, too, and so was Emma, never complained. Jenny was a good girl, never really got a chance to get out and meet some of the nicer young fellers and go to barn dances and picnics and such.

"Mr. Grippe, don't you worry none, I'll get that wheat in. Yessir, I'll get it in, yessir, I will, Mr. Grippe. You'll see, yessir . . ." Slowly the beaten man got to his feet and turned toward the peeling varnished door.

"Mr. Kanine, I have not finished with you yet," Grippe snarled while shuffling through the mound of papers in front of him. He knew exactly where the mortgage papers were and the stipulations set forth therein. It was simply his old habit of breaking an already broken man, a play he enjoyed immensely.

"I want to make sure you are aware of the deadline date on which, unless you pay off the mortgage in its entirety, you shall be required to vacate the premises immediately. I assure you, Mr.

Kanine, that you have stretched my patience and my good intentions to the limit, the absolute limit."

"Mr. Grippe, I will see that you get exactly what you deserve, you will be paid in full. That is a good farm, you know it, and right now it has a good crop and you know that, too, Mr. Grippe, and you know I'll see that you get what you got comin', Mr. Grippe. You know I will."

"You will have to hurry, then. After all, you will have to do it by hand . . ."

The farmer quietly closed the door behind him.

" . . . by hand. Do you hear me? You damn well better have the cash ready when I come with the papers. Cash! Do you hear me? Cash!"

Grippe slammed his ledger shut, resentful that the farmer dared to leave his office without permission, denying him the customary pleasure of dismissing a client with a slam of the account book, a withering glare over the top of his spectacles, and an admonishment to the unfortunate individual pinned by debt to the wooden chair immediately in front of his desk . . . I expect full payment on demand. You may now leave. I have more important work to do than review your case again.

Though denied this dubious pleasure, Grippe looked forward to the impending foreclosure, another notch in his belt, another section of fertile acreage added to his holdings in Downcast County, South Dakota. Ha, close the door on me before I dismiss him, will he! Well, I shall be out there come next Wednesday noon. Oh yes, indeedly, I shall be out there.

Banker Grippe, mortgage papers in hand, stepped from his buggy, dropped the horse's anchor weight, adjusted his string tie, then, looking for all the world like a shiny black cricket, skittled, almost hopped, across the field of ripe golden wheat toward the distant figure wielding a scythe through the lush stalks. Well, he thought with glee, gradually closing the distance between him and his prey, the old fool can cut all he wants for all the good it'll do him. He can't get it to market, no wagons, no horses. It would take him a month of Sundays to cut it by hand, anyway.

Best I put a stop to it before he tramples down any more of my crop. I'll evict him now and bring in a crew first thing tomorrow. The fool was right, though, it is a good crop.

Grippe, underestimating just how large Kanine's field was and

how far his victim was from the road, found himself quite out of breath as he approached the engrossed farmer's toiling back.

Kanine, intent on the task at hand, was oblivious to Grippe's presence. His rhythmic cadence, timed to a two-step chant, moved him like an automaton mowing long row upon row of the hardy red wheat: "No time to play, got to pay."

A wide swing directed the two handled scythe in a clean horizontal sweep four inches above the base of the ripe stalks. With each swing, *Zsssssst* sang the razor sharp steel blade, step, step plodded the farmer's feet. The hewn straws lay in perfect rows like dead soldiers.

"Row by row, got to mow." Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

"Work my fingers to the bone, now's the time to stop and hone." Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

The sweating man paused, pulled a whetstone from the back pocket of his ragged overalls, and ran it expertly along the four foot curved blade.

"Here, you! Kanine! It's time, do you have the money? Answer me!" shouted Grippe.

The grim reaper continued his chanted cadence, unaware of the intruder. "One two, button my shoe." Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

"Got to keep my farm from harm." Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

The farmer advanced, each two steps a different chant, every four steps a pause to hone the blade, body and soul dedicated to saving the farm and his daughter. The golden harvest would do both, he had to bring it in, nothing else mattered.

"I'm talking to you, damnit, Kanine. How dare you ignore me like this!" the mortgage holder shouted at the farmer's sweaty back. "Did you hear me? I will not tolerate this rudeness, turn around this minute!"

Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

"Three, four, cut some more," Kanine chanted. Swing, *Zsssssst*, step, step.

"God damn you, Kanine, I shall not be treated in this manner," shaking a fist full of papers at the man's back. "I've got to catch the train for Chicago, here's your eviction notice. I expect you to be off my property by next week when I return, understand?" He paused for breath. "All right, damnit, if you don't have the guts to face me, then I'll face you!"

Four long, determined strides brought Grippe directly in front of the toiling farmer.



"Here." He thrust the papers under Kanine's nose. "By God, you don't igno . . ."

"Forced to borrow, brought me sorrow."

Swing, ZsssZsZssst, step, step.

Horror stampeded across Grippe's face, he stood as though frozen, then sensed a thawing sensation in his feet. He felt no pain when the blade swished through sinew and bone, only the sensation of standing on air, of slipping, sliding. His mouth flew open. His eyes bulged. He began falling faster, faster. Now screaming, his black cricket body toppled onto the harvested row; two skinny threshing legs sprayed the bearded stalks red.

The high-buttoned shoes, brimmed with their dismembered contents, quivered momentarily, then stood grimly aloof.

"Well, Mr. Kanine," greeted the friendly wheat buyer at the grange, "... here, let me give you a hand with those sacks. I'm certainly glad all the fellas got together and lent you a reaper and wagon and such, you'da never got your crop in otherwise. Now, by gum, you can pay off that mortgage.

"Ya know, the old woman and me drove by your place t'uther day. She durn near died laughin' at you way over in thet field tryin' to hang up thet scarecrow. When you was tryin' ta tie down thet one arm to the crosspiece, what with the wind blowin' an' such an' thet scarecrow's other arm swingin', it shor looked for all the world like it was athumpin' you on the back and head.

"An' them legs, I have to chuckle jest thinkin' about 'em. They was afloppin' in the breeze as if they was tryin' to run away. She said from a distance it looked just like old man Grippe.

"Ya know, you had ought to git rid of thet thing before he gets back from Chicago. Sure as shootin', he'd get mad about it, and you'd end up in one big heap o' trouble."

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# Bartenders May Come and Go

by Brenda Melton Burnham

**I** like ruts. I enjoy the routine of writing at the same desk, at the same time every day, about the same sleazy character. It comforts me to go to the same barber, the same dry cleaners, the same grocery store.

Which is why I was so upset when I walked down to my local bar and some strange guy stepped up to serve me.

"Where's Eddie?" I asked, somewhat peevishly perhaps.

"Dunno," the kid mumbled. "You want something to drink or not?"

This did not improve my attitude. If anything, it increased my frustration. "Where's Homer?" I demanded. Homer is the owner of Homer's Place. Right away that tells you this is a man of great imagination.

"In the back," the jerk said, turning away.

I got up off my stool and headed for the office. All I'd wanted when I came in was a beer and a jaw, but the situation had gotten out of hand somehow. That I had forced it was not something I cared to think on, so I settled for action.

"Hey, Max." Homer leaned back in his swivel chair and carefully readjusted his three strands of hair over his bald spot. "How's our local celebrity?"

He liked to brag a bit that Max Wilhelm, creator of Jake Sledge, P.I., drank there. Since he also came through with a drink on the house from time to time, as well as having given me credit during my writer's block days, I didn't mind.

"Homer," I greeted back. I sat down on the ugly tan sofa and came directly to the point. "Where's Eddie?"

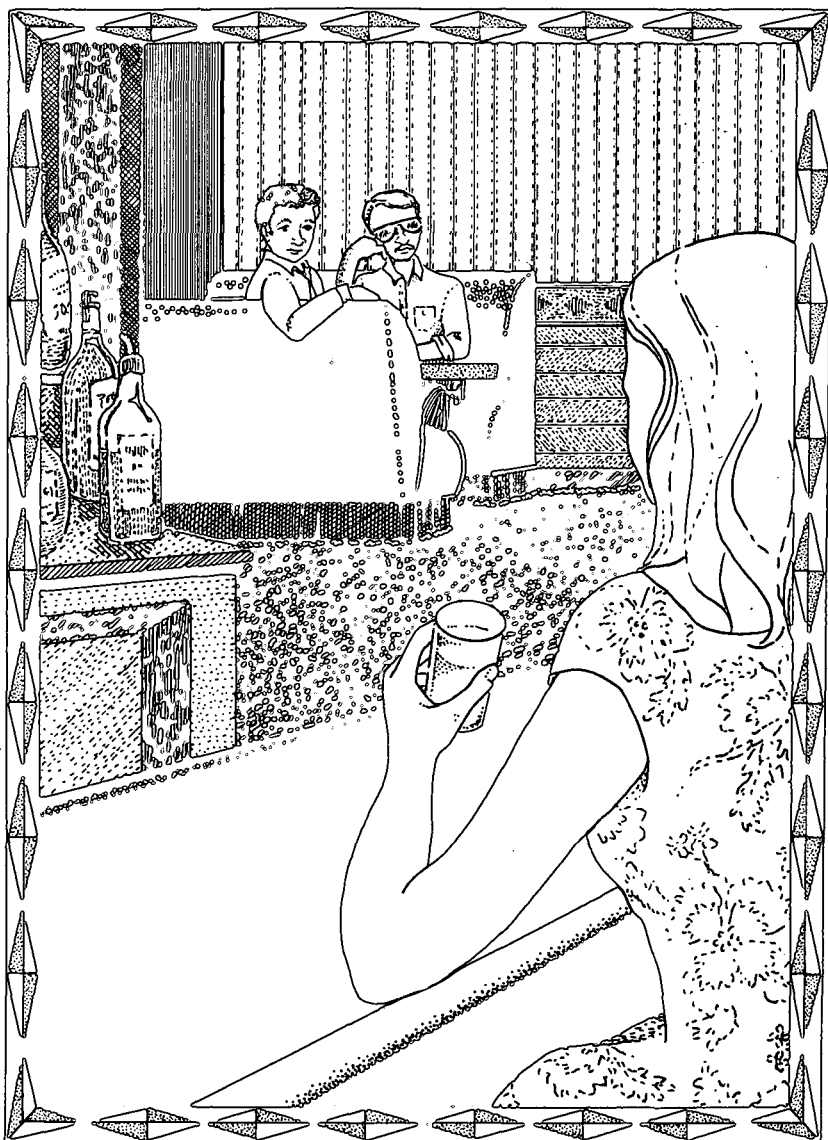
"Dunno. He didn't show up for shift two days ago. Didn't call, nothin'. After two years. I tell you, good help these days is hard to get. Why? He owe you money?"

"No."

"You know how it is, kid. Bartenders come and go. Like women." He grinned at his little joke. "So what's your problem?"

"I was used to Eddie, that's all."

"This new guy's not a bad sort. Name's Blaine. I think



HOMER SHIVERED. "WHAT'RE YOU GONNA DO?"

he's gonna work out. You'll like him, Max, when you get used to him."

"Blaine? You're putting me on. Besides, he's just a kid. Eddie was older, like us." I was being kind here. I was in my early forties, and Homer had a good twenty years on me. "He understood things. What do you talk about with a kid named Blaine, for gosh sakes? You haven't heard anything from Eddie? Maybe he's sick or something."

"Sick, dying, don't make no never mind. You don't show up for shift in this business, you're out of a job. And no, I haven't heard from the guy. How's that for gratitude?"

We sat and contemplated Eddie's defection.

"Hey." Homer sat up in his chair abruptly, causing his three hairs to flutter. He reached automatically to smooth them down again. "I got an idea. You're a mystery writer. You want Eddie back. You go find out what happened to him."

"Homer, I'm not Jessica Fletcher."

"Ha, ha, that's good. You wanna beer? I'm serious, Max. This is somethin' you can do." He hauled his bulk up and waddled to the door. "Hey, Blaine! Bring us a coupla drafts."

Somewhere during the sec-

ond beer I began to think I could do anything a woman could do. By the fourth beer I was certain something terrible had happened to my good buddy Eddie and no one was doing anything about it. By the end of the fifth beer and a trip to the men's room, I knew it was up to me to rescue the man from whatever calamity had befallen him.

Homer searched through his mess of files and gave me Eddie's address. "All I got on him is his address."

"What do you know about him?" I asked. "Is he into the ponies? Drugs? Anything?"

"I just told you, nothin'. The guy came to work, put the money in the till, locked up, and went home. We didn't have long soul-searching conversations about life, okay? What do you know about him?"

Now that I thought about it, nothing. We'd talked about the weather, politics, sports, women. The usual stuff. But I couldn't recall a single personal thing Eddie had ever told me about himself. Of course, I was also working on my sixth beer. Maybe tomorrow, when my head cleared . . .

My head wasn't that much clearer the next morning. Still, a commitment was a commitment. After I finished my morning stint of writing, I

drove over to the address Homer had given me.

The building was old and rundown, the sort of place hundreds of Eddies would live in. People earning enough money to keep them out of the cold and driving an old clunker that broke down regularly. I walked up the stairs to Apartment 3B and knocked.

No response. I rapped again, harder. Nothing.

I went back downstairs and tapped on the door of the manager's apartment. A young woman with a baby on one hip and another kid clinging to one leg opened the door. They all looked alike except her nose wasn't running. She frowned at me and said, "Yes?"

"Hello. My name's Max Wilhelm and I'm a friend of Eddie Dunne's. He hasn't shown up for work for three days, and we're getting concerned." I'm not good at playing the nice-y-nice game. I tried flashing a big friendly smile. It made my lips want to go hide.

"He paid his rent last week like always. Maybe he had to go out of town." The baby grabbed at her hair. The woman pulled its hand away without looking. "Stop that," she said and started to close the door.

I assumed she was talking to her hairdresser and not me, so I

carried on. "Ma'am, would you mind going upstairs and checking Eddie's apartment with me? I mean, what if he's sick or something and couldn't get to the phone?"

She hesitated. "We aren't supposed to . . ."

I was getting ready to plead when she squinted up at me with a somewhat interested look. "Are you somebody important, like on TV or something?"

Publicity does have its rewards. I'd just been on a local talk show promoting my latest book. I informed the woman, with a degree of modesty, that I was indeed a writer of some renown.

She didn't seem overly impressed. "Oh, yeah, I remember now. I always watch that show. Sometimes they have movie stars on it, you know."

I followed her lead. "I've met Tom Selleck."

"You're kidding! What's he like, really? Is he as nice as he seems?"

"Why don't I tell you while we're walking upstairs?"

She debated my offer. "Well, all right. But you can't touch anything, okay? Watch Lance and Zack while I get the key." She thrust the small child into my arms.

Lance? Zack? Blaine? Where were people coming up with

these silly names? Whatever happened to Homer and Eddie? And Max?

Zack smelled of sweet milk and sour diapers. He immediately grabbed my nose. Children are like cats; they can instantly spot people who don't much like them. Eddie was going to owe me a drink or two when I found him.

I regaled my audience with Tom Selleck stories all the way to 3B. Luckily, I'm a fiction writer; the closest I'd ever been to the guy was to see him across the room.

The woman fumbled with the key, then shoved the door open. The apartment smelled stale, as if the air needed vacuuming.

Inside it looked a lot like mine: untidy. A ratty lounge chair and an old brown couch with ancient foodstains. A television set. My TV was bigger.

A large cardboard box stood open on the dinette table. The UPS label on it was addressed to Eddie Dunne. There was no return.

"Mommie, look," Lance said before snuffling loudly.

Mommie and I ignored him. She relieved me of Zack so I could peer around the small kitchen. A dirty bowl and mug stood beside the sink; a Mr. Coffee machine nearby held a pot with a half-inch of brown liquid in it.

"Look, Mommie," the kid said again.

"Might as well check the bedroom," I suggested.

She shrugged. I turned to go toward the hall on the other side of the living room.

"Mommie!" Lance removed his finger from his nose and pointed. This time for some reason we both looked. Hanging half off the arm of the sofa, head down, was a snake large enough to swallow King Kong.

**“W**ell, it may not have been quite that big,” I admitted later to Homer. “But it sure looked like it at the time.”

We were sitting in the back booth at his place. He was sucking another glass of suds, I was on my third cup of coffee. Walking three blocks home while under the influence can be too much two nights in a row; all Homer had to do was climb a few stairs.

He cackled appreciatively at my story. “What kind of snake was it?” he asked.

“A boa constrictor.”

Homer's eyes widened, then narrowed in disbelief.

“Hey, would I kid you? That's what the guy from the zoo said. The cops called him to come and get the damn thing.”

Something caught Homer's eye and drew his attention away from further explanations, which was just as well. The story got tamer after that. Still, I looked around to see what had distracted him.

A woman in a bright red dress approached the bar and perched on a stool. The entire action was one of extreme sensuality. Adding to the liquid movement were long ink-black hair and Marilyn Monroe curves. If the front view was only half as good as the back, I couldn't blame Homer a bit; I've always preferred well-rounded women myself. Not to mention the fact that Homer's Place was not usually adorned with such pulchritude.

"Not bad," I said, turning back to my coffee cup in as casual a manner as possible. "Who is she?"

"I don't know. Last night was the first time she's been in."

"Maybe she's new in the neighborhood?"

"Yeah. Maybe."

Neither of us really believed that. This wasn't her sort of neighborhood, nor her sort of bar. Even from the back you could tell.

"She drinks stingers," Homer murmured, whether to himself or to me I wasn't sure. "She was here not quite an hour last night, drank two, and rejected

three advances." He swallowed the last of his beer. "Sure you don't want a drink?"

Funny how things often come together in the middle of the night when you're in a dead sleep. My eyelids binged open somewhere around quarter to four with the clear memory of a remark Eddie had once made to me.

Who knows what we had started out talking about. One way or another the conversation had worked around to hunting and wild animals. "There's only one thing I'm truly scared of," Eddie said, "and that's snakes. Just the sight of one on TV makes my skin crawl."

I was still trying to make two and two add up the next morning when the phone rang.

"Max? It's me, Homer." His voice vibrated with excitement. "You know our mystery lady? Well, right after you left, I went to tell Blaine I was going upstairs to bed when I heard her ask him a question."

"Yeah?" I prompted when he didn't continue.

"She said, 'What shift does Eddie work?' "

Well, well, well. Add an Eve to our little garden of Eden. "I suppose Blaine, bright boy that he is, told her Eddie didn't work here any more?" I said,

not wanting Homer to get overly impressed with his detecting skills.

"I spoke up before he got the chance. Told her Eddie was off for a few days and could I help her."

I knew he was waiting for a little praise, so I gave it to him. "Good move. What'd she say?"

"She said, 'When do you expect him back?' You should hear her voice, Max. It sorta tickles all the way down your backbone, you know what I mean?"

"Spare me the salacious details, Homer, and just recite the conversation, okay?"

He probably had no idea what salacious meant, but he got the idea.

"I told her he was supposed to call me today or tomorrow and could I give him a message. 'Tell him Miranda said hello,' she says and gives me a big smile. Then she lays a dollar on the bar and walks out. What do you think it means, Max?"

"I don't know what it means, Homer."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed.

"But I intend to find out."

"Oh." He sounded happy again, momentarily. "Will I see you tonight? What should I tell her? I don't know what..."

"I don't know either, yet. I'll get back to you."

What did Eddie have that would make a broad like that interested in him? He was just your average guy, like me. I don't have women like that asking about me.

Maybe he sold drugs? He didn't look like a drug dealer, but then a smart one wouldn't. Which brought me to my next question: was Eddie smart?

I don't mean to belittle bartenders, but Blaine had impressed me as having the mentality of a tulip. Of course, when you come right down to it, you don't need brains to be a writer.

I'd never wondered about Eddie's prowess in the intellect department. He had served my beer cold, he could converse on a variety of topics, and he had the rare quality of knowing when not to talk. In short, the perfect bartender.

I veered back to my original question. No, I decided. I didn't think he was a drug dealer. Frustrated, I went into the kitchen for another cup of liquid energy. As I stared down at my Mr. Coffee machine the realization hit me.

I never had looked closely at Eddie's apartment. The police had come, decided they didn't want anything more to do with the snake than we did, and called the zoo. Then, to maintain their image, they asked a



few questions (mostly what the heck was I doing nosing around in somebody else's apartment). When I suggested something serious might have happened to him, they suggested I file a missing persons report.

Throughout all this, the zoo guy oohed and ahed over the snake, Lance kept asking if he could hold it "just for a little while," Zack cried, and Mommie glared at me as if I was the cause of the whole thing. When it was all over the cops carefully escorted us downstairs.

There ought to have been something in Eddie's apartment that would give me a clue to his personality. More than a snake and a beautiful woman had, that is. They might be clues, but I hadn't the foggiest idea what they meant.

**Z**ack waved his arms and cooed. Lance asked if we could go find another snake. Mommie was the only one who didn't look all that pleased to see me. "What do you want now? Didn't you cause enough trouble yesterday?"

"We still don't know what's happened to Eddie," I explained. "He could be sick or dying somewhere," I pointed out. "It's up to us. The police aren't going to do anything," I intimated. In between all of

these she argued back. I won out in the end, and the four of us set off once more for 3B.

Without the snake there wasn't a lot to see. With the exception of his wallet and car keys we found nothing of a personal nature. I wasn't sure which bothered me more. Not many people go for two years without leaving their mark on their surroundings somehow, and very few men go out without their wallets.

It was old, the leather falling apart. Inside there were no pictures, no business cards, no credit cards, fifty-seven dollars in bills, and a driver's license. That was it. This guy traveled light.

"He always paid his rent on time," the manager said, beginning to share my concern.

"Can you remember what bank the checks were on?"

"He didn't use checks. He always paid cash."

We stared around at the empty living room. The cardboard box still sat on the table.

"Did you see the UPS man when he delivered this?"

She thought about it. "I don't remember seeing him," she finally admitted.

Before I left we checked the parking area. Eddie's car, a battered old Ford sedan, sat in its stall, patiently waiting for someone to drive it or junk it.

\* \* \*

I drove downtown to the main UPS office. Using a cover story that I had sent a package to Mr. Dunne and wanted to make sure it was delivered, I was shuffled along to four different individuals, who each took the time to explain that I should have asked for verification at the time I sent the package before sending me to someone else.

The last woman sensed my desperation—or else was that rare thing, a truly helpful person—and told me I could speak to Jim when he came in, since that was his route.

“West 135th? Eddie Dunne. A heavy box? Yeah, I delivered it,” Jim assured me when he arrived an hour later.

“You handed it to the guy?”

“Yeah, sure. He didn’t have to sign or nothin’. If you’d wanted him to sign for it, you shoulda . . .”

“Yes, I know. What did the guy look like?”

“Just an average guy.”

“I mean, did he look surprised? Happy? Nervous?”

“Wet. He looked wet, like he just got outta the shower. His hair was still dripping, and all he had on was a pair of jeans.”

Leaving his wallet on the dresser, I thought. And his car keys. Then he would take the box in to the table and open it.

If he was as terrified of snakes as he’d told me, he could have rushed outside, discovered he couldn’t drive anywhere . . . and then what?

I thanked Jim for his information and left.

Homer’s Place had a smattering of people murmuring to themselves and each other over their drinks when I arrived at eight thirty and joined Homer in the back booth.

“She ain’t come in yet,” he announced. “I been watching.”

“You or Blaine don’t remember anything more about her?”

“She’s a stunner. What else you gonna remember besides that?”

I gave him a withering glance.

“What did you come up with?” he said in an effort to pitch the ball into my court.

I was ready. “Eddie suffered from ophidiophobia . . .”

“Huh?”

“Fear of snakes.” I wasn’t about to tell Homer I’d looked the information up this afternoon. Who knows? I might be able to use it in a book sometime. “Where’s my beer?”

Homer hollered at Blaine. Blaine delivered my brew and departed. I took a big sip and related the rest of what I’d learned during the day.

“So you’re saying Eddie was

so scared of snakes he took one look and split? No shoes, no wallet, no nothing? I mean, hell, everybody's afraid of snakes."

"Not everybody, Homer. And even those who aren't crazy about them—like you and me—aren't necessarily traumatized by them. But I think Eddie is. Like people who are terrified of flying."

Homer mulled it over. "So where do you think he is?"

"He didn't mention any friends, any family?"

Homer shook his head. "Nothin'. I been thinking and thinking, but I tell you I don't know nothin' about this guy. Except he was a good bartender."

We drank to that, silently.

"I figure tomorrow I'll start checking around at local hospitals, missing persons, that sort of thing." I didn't say the morgue. I didn't have to. Homer wasn't that stupid.

"What're you gonna do when she comes in?" he asked. He said "she" as it was written in the H. Rider Haggard novel.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"She" came in at ten thirty-seven. This time she wore a vivid print dress with a severe case of static cling until it dropped below her hips, where it fell in perfect drapes that eddied like river currents as she

walked. Her heels made tapping sounds that echoed through the silent room. She would have stood out anytime, anywhere. In a neighborhood where baggy pants and earth shoes were the common female garb she could cause dead men to rise again.

When she settled onto her stool, a collective sigh shuddered through the building as every male in the place started to breathe again. Blaine placed a stinger on a fresh coaster in front of her.

Homer shivered. "What're you gonna do?"

I still didn't know. But I wasn't about to admit it. Without answering, I got up and walked over to the bar. She smelled like wild jungle orchids. I'd never smelled wild jungle orchids. Maybe they didn't smell at all. But that's what I thought of. I could even feel the heat, the press of lush tropical plants, hear the sound of strange animals padding through the underbrush...

"I understand you're looking for Eddie." I handed Blaine a five to pay for her drink.

He glanced from me to her. She lowered long dark lashes and smiled. He took the five and left.

"I'm a friend of his," I said, straddling the stool beside her. She turned and gazed at my

too-long crewcut, down my twice-broken nose, past my blue shirt with some unidentified and unremovable stain outline to my wrinkled Dockers and scuffed deck shoes.

"Really?"

"Maybe not that close a friend. He never told me about you."

She laughed, a breathy, husky sound. Up close you could tell she wasn't young—mid-thirties, maybe?—but it didn't matter. She was in her prime, and she knew it.

"My name's Max. Max Wilhelm."

"Miranda," she said. "So he never told you about me."

I ordered another beer. Blaine served it, left my change, and returned to the other end of the bar.

"You were going to tell me where I could find Eddie."

I made circles on the varnished wood with the condensation from my glass. "No. I said I heard you were looking for him."

"Ah," she said. "So you did. And so I am."

I took a shot in the dark. "I assume you've gone by his place?"

She gazed back at me and smiled that little smile.

"He wasn't home?"

She didn't answer. "Perhaps I could give him a message?"

"You haven't already told him I was looking for him?"

I wasn't sure who was winning this little game. I'd thought I was ahead on points, but maybe not.

"Would you like another drink?" I asked.

"No, thank you. I really must be going. Do tell Eddie, when you see him, of course, that I was here, won't you?"

"You were great, Max," Homer said when I returned to the back booth. "Great."

"Great? You mean because I didn't drool on her? I didn't find out a thing."

"You will, Max. You had her eating out of your hand."

Right.

I started calling the hospitals at eight thirty the next morning. The third one responded positively. After my story of a friend who had disappeared, etcetera, the pleasant female voice said, "Just a moment, sir. I'll let you speak to Mrs. Sawyer."

Mrs. Sawyer had a nice, efficient-sounding voice. After I'd given my pitch, she replied, very carefully, "It is possible your friend is here, Mr. Wilhelm. Could you describe him for me?"

"Six foot, dark brown hair, slightly graying, hundred and eighty to two hundred pounds,

late thirties, a small scar near his left eye . . .”

“A man of that description was brought here three days ago. Apparently he ran in front of an oncoming car. The driver said he did his best to swerve, but had no warning. Would you be able to come down and identify your friend for us?”

When I arrived at Mrs. Sawyer's office, a man in a rumpled corduroy sport coat and khaki pants waited with her.

“This is Detective Johnson,” she said. “Mr. Wilhelm.”

The three of us shook hands. I told them the basic story, that Eddie had not shown up for work, that Homer and I had become concerned, that we had no idea what could have caused him to run directly into traffic. I didn't mention the woman, or the snake. I figured I'd get around to that later.

After twenty minutes of this, Detective Johnson nodded and Mrs. Sawyer said, “Your friend has two broken ribs, a broken arm, contusions, and a severe concussion. Dr. Troy expects him to return to consciousness within the next twenty-four hours. There is no sign of brain damage.”

They even took me in for a quick look. It's always tough to recognize people when they're lying in a hospital bed with bandages and machines and ev-

erything, but it was Eddie all right. I said so. Detective Johnson and Mrs. Sawyer nodded as if I had passed some kind of test.

“I'll let you know when he's conscious and can receive visitors,” Mrs. Sawyer told me, and that was it. I was dismissed.

I called Homer. He was glad to hear that I'd located his missing bartender (“Dumb thing to do,” he said. “Get yourself hit by a car. He deserved to be fired.”) and wanted to know if I was coming down. I told him no, which panicked him.

“What if she comes in?”

“So? She's a customer. Serve her.”

“What if she asks about Eddie?”

“You don't know anything more than you did before.”

“Okay, right. Right.”

He wasn't convinced, but he didn't press. I had no idea where she fit into the puzzle and hoped Eddie would supply some answers when he came to.

Which he did about nine thirty that night, according to the nurse on the floor when I'd called for the fifth time. I finally got to see him at ten thirty the next morning. He still looked awful, but at least he was moving.

“Max,” he croaked in greeting. “What'll you have?”

We had a good laugh over

that. At least I grinned a bit and he sort of half chuckled, half coughed, half gasped.

I never know what to say to sick people, so I shoved my vase of flowers onto a bedside table and said, "You look like hell." With the social amenities out of the way, I went straight to business. "What's the deal with the snake?"

His eyes got a little shifty.

"Listen, pal. Homer and I've been worried sick. I've gone to a bit of trouble to find you. Now, we don't have a lot of time before they throw me out of here, and I need some answers. Who's Miranda?"

He closed his eyes, then opened them again. "You've seen her?"

I nodded.

"How does she look?"

"Terrific."

He nodded. "I knew she would. Does she know I'm here?"

"Not yet. You want to tell me about her?"

He didn't answer right away. It seemed to take forever, but gradually the story came out. Eddie had been a systems engineer for a large manufacturing company, working on an electronic chip that would translate written material into audio. Miranda had been a secretary for the same company. He was dazzled when she

showed interest in him; they began a torrid affair that had him alternately high and low. (I said, "Any woman can do that to you if you let her," and he said, "Not like Miranda.") It didn't seem strange to him when she asked about his work, even though it was secret.

When a competitor came out with the same product two months before his company, suspicions were raised. "It wasn't as good as ours was," he said, "but they had it first. And their design was enough like ours to be a twin."

Eddie was called on the carpet and forced to admit he had discussed the project. He and Miranda were both fired and his reputation was ruined. "I couldn't get a job anywhere in the industry."

Still he couldn't break off his affair with the woman. "I hung around her like a sick pup. Spent all the money I had in reserve—she does love money—and borrowed more. It was like a disease." Finally, in a frenzy of shame and disgust, he left the city and fled to the West Coast. He changed his name, did a bit of creative lying, and managed to get work as a bartender in a small local bar.

"It took her nearly three years to find me and another six months for me to leave her.

She had ideas how we could 'work together. Make some big bucks.' He turned his head away. "Now she's found me again."

"And the snake?"

"She sent it. She knows how terrified I am of them. It's her idea of fun, keeping me on the roller coaster. It's always like that with her. Excitement, life on the edge. She thinks 'routine' and 'calm' are bad words. What's scary is that when you're with her you begin thinking that way, too."

The nurse came along just then, gave us both a lecture for wearing him out, and escorted me from the room. Eddie's story depressed me. I dropped in at Homer's Place and took my beer back into Homer's office.

He listened to the whole thing and tsk-tsked in the right places. "What're you going to do now?" he asked when I finished.

"How do I know? What do you do with a guy like that? He knew she's bad news. It doesn't seem to make any difference."

"Getting hit by a car didn't knock it outa him, for gosh sakes?"

I shrugged. Eddie didn't seem too confident about it. Why should I be? We sat and stared at each other until Homer's phone buzzed.

"Yeah?" he growled. He lis-

tened for a few minutes, then covered the mouthpiece with his hand and stage-whispered, "She's here. She's out front asking to see you."

Before I could think of what to say, the door opened and Miranda the Marvelous came in with a grand entrance that outdid anything Loretta Young might've thought of all those years ago. Today she wore purple. Rich, regal, elegant purple.

"Gentlemen," she said in that husky voice.

We sat and stared.

"You can hang up the phone, Mr. Quigley," she said to Homer. All these years and I'd had no idea what his last name was. He hung up like a good little boy.

She turned to me. "I understand you've located Jim." She waited until I figured out she was talking about Eddie before continuing. "I'd really like to see him. Would you take me there?"

"You obviously know where he is. You don't need me." I decided I sounded pretty good. Tough yet nonchalant. "What did you do, follow me?"

She smiled. Her lips were perfectly shaped. I imagined what it must be like to kiss them . . .

"Hospital regulations can be so silly." She smiled, waiting for my decision.

Homer leaned back in his chair as if he'd been hit by an ice storm and was frozen in that position forever.

What's a guy to do? You can't protect people from themselves. If Eddie was going to fall into her grasp again, the only thing I could achieve would be to delay the inevitable.

The hell with it. "Okay by me," I said.

Homer still hadn't thawed. Miranda smiled and waited for me to open the door for her.

I did at least try to have her wait in the hall while I went in and spoke to Eddie first.

"Darling, I've known him far longer than you have. I don't need you to announce my arrival."

No. Only to get her past the nurse's station. Which I'd done. She smiled that glorious smile—triumph now adding to its glow—and breezed through the door as I opened it.

"Jimmie, sweetheart, you poor thing. You look terrible." She flowed across the room and leaned over to kiss him.

Wild jungle orchids mingled with hospital smells and made my teeth clench. Eddie looked—sick? Stunned? Transfixed? I couldn't decide. Miranda continued to coo over him.

"Don't worry, darling. I'm

here now, and I'll take care of everything. It'll be all right. Your Miranda's here."

Eddie's eyes shifted to me. I shrugged helplessly. Miranda continued to chatter.

That's when I got the idea. From her. The minute she paused, I opened my mouth and let the words fall out of it.

"Hey, man, when do you think you're gonna get out of here? We miss you down at Homer's. He's got a kid there, name of Blaine, can you believe it? Anyway, this kid is pulling your shift while you're gone, and he's awful. Homer needs you back, man. I need you back. Say, did you hear about the game the other night? L.A. was ahead by one point, there was only twenty-eight seconds left . . ."

I have no idea what dribbled off my lips after that. Miranda turned and glared, and I just kept on talking. She began stroking his face and arms and murmuring softly, and I just kept on talking.

When the nurse came in, she startled all three of us.

"What do you think you're doing? Young woman, get off that bed. You," she snapped at me, "stop yelling. I have to give this man a shot. You can both wait outside. I'll let you know when, and if, you can return."

I shut up and headed for the



door. To my amazement, even Miranda obeyed without demur. We walked down the hall to the waiting area silently. Miranda took a chair on the far side and refused to look at me. I slouched against the opposite wall and tried not to pout.

Ten minutes went by before the nurse appeared. "Mr. Dunne would like for you to come in," she said.

I straightened up. Miranda rose elegantly.

The nurse turned to her. "He wants to see the gentleman alone."

I was careful to keep the grin off my face until I was headed down the hall the other way.

"Yeah, Eddie?" I said as I approached his bed.

"Do you really think Homer'd have me back?" he croaked.

"Are you kidding? In a hot flash."

He closed his eyes.

"I kinda miss ole Homer," he whispered. "It's not a bad place to work, you know?" He paused. "Routine. Calm. It's calm."

"Ruts are nice," I said.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



**T**he Butcher's Boy is back in Thomas Perry's **Sleeping Dogs** (Random House, \$22, 337 pp). The Butcher's Boy is a professional assassin who has gone underground after a major spree through the Mafia as retaliation for a contract completed but not paid for. One day, at the races in England, he sees a young mafioso who in turn recognizes him. The young hood is sure that his way to the top will be through killing the Butcher's Boy, and the Butcher's Boy is sure that he has been tracked down by the dons. At the same time, a U.S. federal agent who "lost" the Butcher's Boy after the last series of murders is also hot on his trail. A series of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, near misses, and many killings brings the Butcher's Boy back to the U.S. after ten long years to further intimidate the Mafia, the police, and several not-so-innocent bystanders.

**"I" Is for Innocent** by Sue Grafton (Henry Holt, \$18.95, 286 pp) is the ninth in the Kinsey Milhone alphabet series. In *I*, Kinsey is investigating from a new location. She has moved into the offices of attorney Lonnie Kingman and is covering a case of murder—a case in which the husband was acquitted almost five years earlier. An ex-husband of the victim is attempting to get justice by suing in civil court for wrongful death, legally not double jeopardy. The problem is that the previous detective has died and his files are a mess; Kinsey has less than a month to clarify the case, serve the subpoenas, and prove the husband guilty. But is he? A great shootout scene at the end, but don't cheat; read this one through page by page to get the true flavor of Kinsey's investigation.

M.C. Beaton's Hamish MacBeth series continues with **Death of**

a **Prankster** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 151 pp). MacBeth's nemesis, Chief Inspector Blair, is meddling in the investigation as usual, but Hamish is hot on the trail among the various greedy relatives of victim Arthur Trent, practical joker extraordinary and wealthy owner of Trent Baby Foods. All the relatives, called to Trent's countryside Scottish manor, need the money he might have willed them, and all, therefore, have motive as well as opportunity. But Trent tormented everyone with his jokes, servants and villagers as well as family. MacBeth must narrow the field and identify the real culprit before more die.

Truman Smith is back in Bill Crider's **Gator Kill** (Walker, \$18.95, 186 pp). This book doesn't have the same feel as the earlier *Dead on the Island* (1991), primarily because Truman is not located in Galveston but in the country somewhere west of Houston and because he is less obsessed with the search for his missing sister. He is still trying to get back "into" life, however, and is finding that investigations, even investigations as potentially weird as the search for the murderer of an alligator, are helping him recover his equilibrium. Alligators are not his favorite animals, though, and he isn't pleased to be down among them when he discovers that there is more than poaching behind the death of alligators on old friend Fred Benton's land. Why are people reporting rustling when no cattle have disappeared? What are those strange noises in the night, and why has Fred been receiving harassing telephone calls? When Fred and Truman are shot at, the investigation escalates, and Truman is now investigating for his life.

Two serial killers are on the loose in New Haven, Connecticut. One is killing ex-nuns and marking their foreheads with the sign of the Eucharist. The other is executing, gangland style, young boy prostitutes. The connection is Pat Mallory, chief of homicide in Orania Papazoglou's **Charisma** (Crown, \$19, 312 pp). He is investigating both, even though, as chief, he is only supposed to administrate. Also involved is the Church in the person of Father John Kelly, assistant to the bishop; Father Thomas Brune, who runs a halfway house for runaways; and Susan Murphy, who recently left the convent for reasons she cannot define, even to herself. Other important characters include Susan's brothers Andy and Dan, the latter a politically ambitious D.A. who sees a way to get elected to higher office by framing Father Brune for child abuse, homicide officers Deaver (a good cop) and Dbro (an incompetent cop), and the killer of the ex-nuns, who narrates parts of the book. Is there more than meets the eye to these killings and politi-

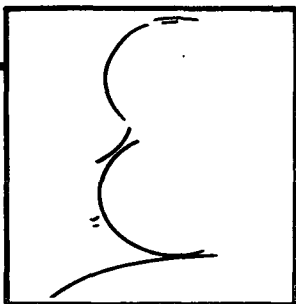
cal machinations, both in and out of the Church? Totally unlike Ms. Papazoglou's other books, whether written under this name or a pseudonym.

**Switching the Odds** by Phyllis Knight (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 194 pp) is a first mystery and introduces Private Investigator Lil Ritchie, ex-rock guitarist and wanderer who has settled with her cat Littlefield in Maine to act as an investigator for her attorney friend, Molly Byrne. Lil specializes in the location of missing people, and when James Cooper of Richmond, Virginia, calls her, hoping that his runaway son Jesse is on his way to Maine to see James's black-sheep father, and hoping that Lil can find Jesse and send him back, she takes on the assignment. What Lil finds, however, is murder (Jesse witnessed it), shady land deals, pornography, and extortion. Lil now has to wander again, back to Austin, Texas, where she gave up rock-and-roll performing, to protect Jesse and his family and expose the villain for what he really is. Unusual detective; excellent settings (Austin is right on); good suspense.

Homer Kelly is quite fascinated with Ananda Singh, an apparently poor Indian aficionado of Thoreau and *Walden*. Ananda is smitten with Hope Fry, rebellious daughter of another Thoreau nut. Hope is taken with Jack Markey, handsome architect and flunky of Jefferson Grandison, developer. Grandison, in turn, is desirous of the land in the vicinity of Walden Pond. **God in Concord** by Jane Langton (Viking Mystery, \$19, 338 pp) brings all these characters together in an attempt to find out exactly what it is that Grandison wants the Walden property for. And why are the elderly (and not-so-elderly) residents of nearby Pond View Trailer Park dying of suspicious accidents? Why does real estate maven Mimi Pink's success or failure in "gentrifying" downtown Concord seem to be so intimately tied into Grandison's schemes, the appearance of a number of Boston's homeless on the scene, and the behind-the-scenes machinations of the planning officer, Roger Bland? Prettily illustrated with Ms. Langton's line drawings, *God in Concord* is a worthy ninth entry in her Homer and Mary Kelly series on the transcendentalist town of Concord, Massachusetts.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**S**ingle White Female offers the most popular moral floating through Hollywood thrillers these days: don't trust strangers. In the hit hair-raiser *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, we saw a newly hired, loving nanny gradually revealed as a family's worst nightmare, a psycho sitter from hell. In *Unlawful Entry*, the protective cop became overprotective, intrusive, and another nightmare.

In this latest edge-of-the-seater, the stranger cum wacko takes the form of a new roommate in a beautiful rent-controlled apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

It's there that we first get a look at Allie Jones (Bridget Fonda), a budding businesswoman who's storming the fashion world with computer technology. She shares her apartment with Sam Rawson

(Steven Weber), a generic sort of boyfriend who thrills her with a marriage proposal.

Tossing a few drops of cold water on the dainty domestic scene is Sam's ex-wife, who calls late at night "to talk." The drops turn into a torrent of tears when, through the magic of a telephone answering machine, Allie learns her love visited his ex for a little afternoon of passion.

Sam gets tossed out.

But living alone in that spacious apartment doesn't sit well with Allie. "The thought of buying those books like *Cooking for One* is depressing," she tells her gay upstairs neighbor Graham (Peter Friedman), who seems to be Allie's only friend in New York. "I'll get a roommate," she chirps.

What follows is a parade of would-be roomies, each with pretty obvious defects. It's kind

of like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*—one roomie is too hot, one is too cold, and finally, one is just right.

Just right is Hedy Carlson (Jennifer Jason Leigh). The two share a bonding experience at the kitchen sink which breaks and drenches them both. They chat over tea while waiting for their clothing to dry, cementing the new relationship.

As the pair pal around New York, we get to know Hedy, who appears introverted and insecure. She's also something of a bohemian, fixing up antique furniture and wearing stylishly old jewelry. And, she tells Allie, she was supposed to be a twin, but her sister was stillborn. "I grew up feeling a part of me was missing," she says.

But Hedy is not so shy and innocent as she first appears. Behind Allie's back, she erases telephone messages from Sam. She leafs through Allie's things and ingratiates herself by making breakfast, constantly complimenting Allie, and bringing home an impossibly cute puppy named Buddy.

She becomes so attached to Allie that Hedy dresses like her and finally gets a matching haircut. The two actually look like twin sisters.

Hedy has an ulterior motive, but what it is remains unclear

for some time. It's obvious that she doesn't want Sam back in the picture. She'll do almost anything, and does, to drive a wedge between him and Allie. Sure, she'll lose her apartment share, but there's more to it, a psychological motive.

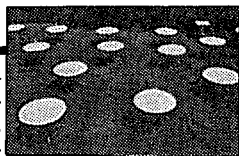
Gradually, things between Allie and Hedy become ugly. Allie is forced to tiptoe around her own apartment, afraid to awaken demons in Hedy's increasingly twisted mind. When she and Sam do get back together, she must find a way to get Hedy out of her life.

Jennifer Jason Leigh is a top-notch cinematic psycho who manages to change her stripes as the film progresses. At first, she appears no different from many New Yorkers, unsure of herself and a little neurotic. But a controlled anger boiling beneath the surface bubbles up more and more furiously.

Bridget Fonda doesn't have as much to work with. Nevertheless, she does a good job with her role, and the two make an excellent combination.

The other star of this thriller is not an actor but a building. Like the Dakota in *Rosemary's Baby*, the Ansonia, also a West Side landmark, helps breathe life into the movie. Its forbidding shadows, spiraling staircase, dingy basement, and airy apartments add character as well as suspense.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The August Mysterious Photo-  
Michael Green of Brat-  
mentions go to Andrew W.  
Scotia, Canada; Jim Ingra-  
Florida; Donna Miska of Horseheads, New York; Natalie Whitmore of Myrtle  
Creek, Oregon; Pat Popelier of East Moline, Illinois; Katherine Marcella of Hunts-  
ville, Alabama; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Dorothy Glovsky of  
Ashland, Wisconsin; Emily A. Plummer of Calistoga, California; Ann Andos of  
Reno, Nevada; Michael Brookes of Youngstown, Ohio; and Diane M. Piechocki of  
Brampton, Ontario, Canada.

tograph contest was won by  
tleboro, Vermont. Honorable  
Paterson of Dartmouth, Nova  
ham of Ft. Myers Beach,

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## BURNED OUT by Michael Green

First the tables, then the candles, then the chairs, thirteen of them—Christ, you almost have to wonder, is this really worth it? Thirteen good-size pieces of rope, then thirteen champagne glasses, one per setting, each filled to the brim with U-Save Super Un-leaded.

On the small square table up front, your lighter and the Cooper BrushMaster flamethrower—"a forestfire-fighter's best friend"—its five gallon tank nicely topped off.

Next, the hard part.

From inside the house, one by one, you half-drag, half-carry out the thirteen slobes you've spent the last ten years of your life living next door to—neighbors to the left and right who share this quaint little suburban cul-de-sac of yours, gathered here together this fine afternoon at your invitation, a neighborly little get-together that surely should've happened long before now—each and every one of them as numb as a log, having all liberally sampled the Quaalude-Xanax-Valium-laced punch served inside the house, each and every one of them as docile as a stuffed duck as you tie him or her securely into a chair, one at each table . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen," you say, moving to the front and strapping on the flamethrower at last. "Thank you all so much for coming."

Lighting the lighter, the small flame dancing now at the tip of the flamethrower's nozzle, your hand sliding slowly down to the fuel adjustment dial.

"Kind neighbors and good friends," you say. "I'd like to propose a . . . toast."

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(21) \$64.05	(22) \$67.10	(23) \$70.15	(24) \$73.20	(25) \$76.25
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AH MID-DECEMBER/92

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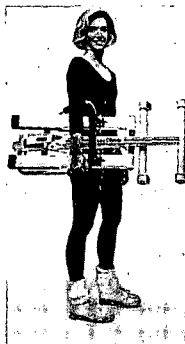
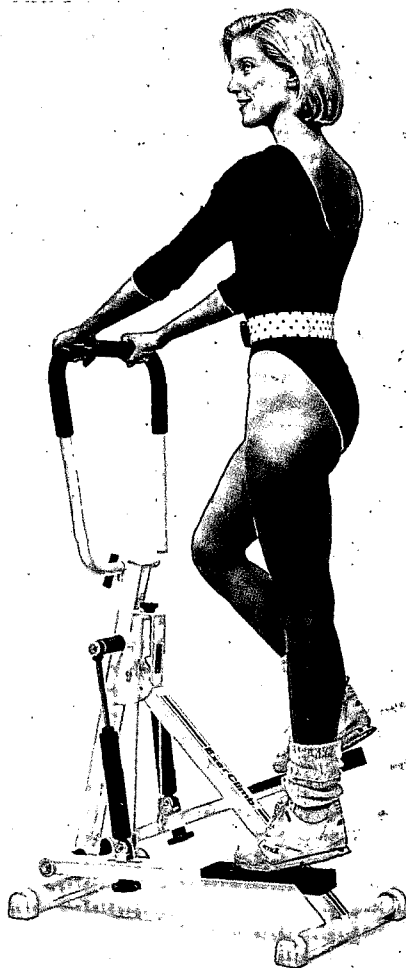
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